

WHEN HORIZONS DARKEN:

The Process and Experience of Religious Conversion Among Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees in London

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own work and constitutes the result of my research in the subject.

Albert W Jebanesan

To my parents

Florence Jebamalar Albert

and

the late Jebanayagam Navaratnam Albert

and also

to the revered memory of

the late Revd Dr. Kingsley T. Muttiah

former President of the Methodist Church in Sri Lanka

who encouraged me for this endeavour

but died just before I began my research

And to Priya, my wife.

ABSTRACT

This work is an inquiry into the religious conversion from folk Hinduism into Pentecostal Christianity among Sri Lankan Tamil refugees living in London. There is an estimated number of 35,000 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in London. Many of them have decided to 'change their religion' in their quest for a community. They have formed some 22 new All-Tamil Pentecostal congregations in London, with an overall attendance of some 3,000 every Sunday. The overwhelming majority of their members are Tamils from Sri Lanka, and most of them converted from their ancestral folk Hinduism into a variety of Pentecostal Christianity. Until the present time (July 1999), the language of communication and communion of the religious services was almost exclusively Tamil; there are now signs of English being gradually introduced in order to incorporate Tamil children who are becoming more fluent in English than in Tamil. There are indications that this trend towards bilingualism and biculturalism in the religious services will spread steadily in the future.

The author attempts to combine the insights and methods of the social sciences and theology, in the persuasion that they can complement each other in an attempt to understand the religious phenomena. The author insists that religious conversion is a social phenomenon, and not only an individual event, though theologians tend to study it as a divine-human encounter on individual basis; social scientists tend to consider religious conversion as an exclusively social event. The author is persuaded that it would be impossible to understand the case of religious conversion among Sri Lankan Tamil refugees, without due consideration paid to the political, social and economic background of the converts, both 'back home' in Sri Lanka and 'out here' in London.

For this reason the author begins his story in the integrated life of Sri Lankan Tamil villages before the war, continues with the sudden disintegration of family, temple and village, and describes the predicament of Tamil refugees in London, concluding with their incorporation into small Pentecostal communities. The data is gathered through **a)** in-depth recorded interviews; **b)** participatory observation of religious services, social events, family gatherings, etc., in line with his holistic approach; **c)** numerous unrecorded conversations with Tamil Christians and Hindus alike; **d)** the Tamil literature and folk-lore that is being produced in London.

The analysis of the data yields important results, such as: **a)** conversion is first to a community, and through the community to God; **b)** there is little evidence that the converts have thoroughly repudiated their previous Hindu religiosity; **c)** the belief system of the converts is of the utmost simplicity, without reference to the official teaching from the pulpits; **d)** the common life and mutual affection play a much more important role than common beliefs; **e)** the event of conversion and the ongoing incorporation, belonging and participation in their respective closely knit religious communities have had a profound therapeutical effect that facilitates the transition from loneliness to communion, from meaninglessness to purpose in life, and from being helpless to becoming helpful, and so forth.

The author is a Tamil Christian minister from Sri Lanka. He has spent six years in Jaffna, Batticaloa and surrounding areas in the nadir of the present ethnic conflict, and has been a witness of the devastation of the villages and the exodus of entire Tamil population to all continents.

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A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

When a Tamil word appears in this study, it is italicised. Where common spellings exist for proper names (people and places) are not italicised and are generally spelled without diacritical marks. E.g.: Sinathurai instead of *cinnatturai*, Allaipeddy instead of *allaipitti*.

VOWELS

அ	(a)	as in English <i>cup</i>
ஆ	(ā)	as in English <i>car</i>
இ	(i)	as in English <i>pit</i>
ஈ	(ī)	as in English <i>feed</i>
உ	(u)	as in English <i>put</i>
ஊ	(ū)	as in English <i>fool</i>
எ	(e)	as in English <i>pet</i>
ஏ	(ē)	as in English <i>raid</i>
ஐ	(ai)	as in English <i>bite</i>
ஒ	(o)	as in English <i>old</i>
ஔ	(ō)	as in English <i>hope</i>
ஔ	(au)	as in English <i>town</i>

CONSONANTS

க	(k)	as in English <i>gold</i>
ங	(ñ)	as in English <i>think</i>
ச	(c)	as in English <i>patch</i>
ஞ	(ñ)	as in English <i>orange</i>
ட	(ṭ)	as in English <i>ladder</i>
ண	(ṇ)	as in English <i>thunder</i>
த	(t)	as in English <i>this</i>
ந	(n)	as in English <i>panther</i>
ப	(p)	as in English <i>cap</i>
ம	(m)	as in English <i>mother</i>
ய	(y)	as in English <i>yes</i>
ர	(r)	as in English <i>Harold</i>
ல	(l)	as in English <i>bill</i>
வ	(v)	as in English <i>hover</i>
ழ	(ḷ)	as in English <i>pull</i>
ள்	(ḷ)	as in English <i>people</i>
ற்	(r)	as in English <i>top</i>
ன்	(ṇ)	as in English <i>hunter</i>
ஃ	(k)	as in English <i>bower</i>

‘Transliteration Table’ *Tamil Lexicon*. Madras: Published Under the authority of the University of Madras, 1924, Vol.1

GLOSSARY OF TAMIL WORDS

Eelam - a Tamil name for Sri Lanka

Kavadi - Hindu ritual

Kālī - Hindu goddess

Mātā - Virgin Mary

aiyō - alas

aiyā - elderly male

akkā - elder sister

alaiccal - wander

ammi - grinding stone

ammā - mother

appā - father

aṟputam - miracle

aṇāttai - orphan

aṇṇai - elder brother

camayam - religion

camātāṇam - peace

cavāl - challenge

cempu - brass pot

cīramatāṇam - voluntary work

curupam - statue

cāppātu - food

cīviyam - life

iraicci - meat

iraṭcippu - salvation

iyakkam - movement

kakkūcu - toilet

kalāccāram - culture

karuttillāta - meaningless

kaṭal - sea

kaṭavuḷ - god

kaṭiṭaṅkaḷ - buildings

kaṭṭāyam - forcible

kōvil - temple

kāṭu - jungle

kāṇikkai - offering

maccāṇ - bosom friend

mariyamman - Hindu goddess

matippu - respect

maṇam - mind

maṇ - soil

murukaṇ - Hindu deity

māṟṟam - change

māṭu - cattle

mīṭṭpu - salvation

nampikkai - faith

nāy - dog

nāykaḷ - dogs

nāṇ - I

nāṅkaḷ - we

olūṅku - order

oṭṭuṇṇi - parasite

pailā - Sri Lankan dance

pakavāṇ - god

pakti - devotion

payaṅkaram - frightful

paṇcāṅkam - Hindu calendar

peṭiyaṅkaḷ - boys

pirivu - separation

piṟar - others

pillai - child

pillaiyār - Hindu deity

poṭṭu - round spot on the forehead

pārampariyam - tradition

pūcai - worship

saṭaṅkukaḷ - rituals

tampi – younger brother

taṇimai - lonely

tiruviḷā – temple festival

tumpu - husk

tīṭcai – Hindu religious teaching

utavi - help

utāraṇam - example

uyirulla - living

uṇmai - truth

vairavar – Hindu deity

valavu – compound/ garden

vaḷi - way

vellaikkāraṇ - white man

viṭutalai - freedom

viṣṇu – Hindu deity

vītu - house

ṇāḱku - tongue

ṇīr - you

āccāram - ritual

ūr - village

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

The present enquiry is an exploration into the phenomenon and the process of religious conversion from folk Hinduism into Pentecostal Christianity among Sri Lankan Tamil refugees living in London. It is estimated that over 35,000 Sri Lankan Tamils have settled in London¹ since 1983 as a consequence of the prolonged armed conflict between the government military forces and the Tamil militants in the North and East Provinces of Sri Lanka.² According to my own observations, at the time of my field research (1996-97) there were 22 new All-Tamil Pentecostal churches in London, with an estimate of some 3,000 attenders every Sunday; not all of them were 'converts' strictly speaking; some were only 'seekers' and had not received baptism by immersion. In any event, it is safe to estimate that about 10% of the Tamil refugees in London have undergone this process of religious emigration³ from their ancestral folk Hinduism to their new Pentecostal Christianity. It is evident that 'church growth' among Tamil refugees in London in few years is something of phenomenal magnitude, compared with the paucity

¹ See "Background Paper on Sri Lankan Refugees and Asylum Seekers." Geneva: UNHCR Centre for Documentation on Refugees, November 1994, pp. 4-5; also Grenier, Matthew, *Protection Denied: Sri Lankan Tamils, the Home Office and the forgotten civil war*. London: The Refugee Council, February 1997.

² A report by the Nuffield Foundation on Research among Tamil refugees says that most of the interviewees are in London because of the war. See the "Report to the Nuffield Foundation on Research," *Integration or Repatriation? Tamil Refugees in the UK*, Ref.: SOC/ 181/ (1868), 1989, pp. 1-2.

³ I borrow the term "emigration" to express the transition from one religion into another from Peter Berger. It is more accurate than "religious conversion" if we intend to denote the change of one religion for another from other than purely religious motives; it may be a useful value-free expression because it strips the language of all theological overtones. See Berger, Peter, *The Sacred Canopy - Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1967, p. 51.

of results after intensive and extensive evangelisation for 500 years among the same ethnic population in Sri Lanka.⁴

All the 22 worshipping communities in London are not implanted or transplanted by foreign missionaries; so we may call the emergence, growth and consolidation of Tamil Pentecostal Christianity in London an adventure in ecclesiogenesis.⁵ There is a constant flow of Tamils enquiring about the church; some are just curious, others want the company of Tamils in a free atmosphere, many are truly interested in Christianity, and most have needs that have to be fulfilled. Refugees expect the solution of their 'problems'⁶ as a result of their incorporation into the churches, and many of those who have been helped become helpers themselves.

⁴ Roman Catholics under the *Padroado* attempted to use what Prof. Duncan Forrester calls "the percolator method" of making converts; by converting the ruling classes, the monarch and their court, they expected that Christianisation would gravitate naturally to the lower classes. See Forrester, Duncan B., "The Depressed Classes and Conversion to Christianity - 1860-1960." in Oddie, G. A. (ed.), *Religion in South Asia: Religious Conversion and Revival Movements in South Asia in Medieval and Modern Times*. New Delhi: Manohar, 1991, pp. 75ff. The Protestant missionaries tried to form the future ruling classes of the country through their effort to educate the aristocracy, in the belief that, by elevating the level of education (and that meant Western education), their Christianization would percolate downwards. The overall result however, was that after so many 'civilising' efforts, the 'Christianising' of the ruling elites never took effect, and conversion did not touch the great masses of the people. Also see Chapter 2: "Encounter and Engagement: The Socio-Political Context of Conversion" in Robinson, Rowena, *Conversion, Continuity and Change: Lived Christianity in Southern Goa*. New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd., 1998 and Quere, Martin. *Christianity in Sri Lanka under the Portuguese Padroado 1597 - 1658*. Colombo, Sri Lanka: Catholic Press, 1995. In Sri Lanka today, not more than 8 % of the population of Sri Lankans call themselves Christians. Out of the Sri Lankan Christian community, 7% consider themselves Roman Catholic; the other 1% are distributed among Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, Dutch Reformed, Presbyterian, Church of South India (Jaffna Diocese) and Pentecostals.

⁵ The word 'ecclesiogenesis' is now quite common in theological parlance among Roman Catholic missiologists. It denotes the emergence, expansion and consolidation of new Christian communities, not through transplantation or implantation from outside, but from the local grassroots. See Boff, Leonardo [Robert R Barr (tr.)], *Ecclesiogenesis: the base communities reinvent the church*. New York: Orbis Books, 1986, pp. 1-9.

⁶ The word 'problems' is the most recurrent term in our conversations. It encompasses any situation that requires a decision for a change. As we shall see often, 'the problems' is also a euphemism to refer to the present ethnic war in Sri Lanka.

Satha, one of my informants, claims that his case can be considered as 'the general criterion' (*utāraṇam*) or pattern (*oḷuṅku*) for Tamils to join the churches in London:

When I went to church for the first time, I went with a worldly need.⁷ It was a simple sickness. I expected the church to meet my need. That was fulfilled, and my faith in Christ grew, and that made me continue my link with the church and eventually become a Christian. That's the general criterion; but some people leave the church as soon as their needs are fulfilled.

We limit our study to a specific homogeneous population who have settled and formed their own ghettos⁸ in London. We call them 'refugees' consistently and are aware of possible misunderstandings about the term.

This 'Introduction', has been written in the last stage of the exploration, when all the chapters have been substantially completed. I anticipate here some findings and reflections that will be elaborated in the subsequent chapters.

1.1 OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

The standard definition of 'refugee' is the one given in the United Nations Commission on Refugees in these terms:

[Refugee is a person who] owing to a well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his formal habitual residence, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.⁹

⁷ For the 'worldly needs' of the converts, I refer the reader to Chapters 3 and 4 of the present work.

⁸ I use the word 'ghetto' throughout this work in a purely descriptive sense, without any pejorative connotation; I have chosen the term because some of my interviewees use it to describe their own neighbourhoods.

⁹ Extract from the Protocol of 1967, UN Convention, relating to status of refugees. Article 1, General provision, #2 taken from "Appendix 1" in Richmond, Anthony H., *Global Apartheid: Refugees, Racism and the New World Order*. Toronto, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 234-38

Not all the subjects of our study fall under this definition. Many of them have resided in London for many years now and have changed, or requested to change, their status; some of them have become permanent residents in London and a few of them are naturalised citizens of the United Kingdom; others came to join their relatives in London. Most of them are employed in paid jobs, and several are at present receiving political asylum benefits. For administrative purposes, a distinction has been introduced to separate 'political refugees' from 'economical refugees'. For us this is a distinction without a difference: all of them have come to London fleeing from the violence and the devastation caused by the present armed ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, and would not be living in London if there had not been a war at home. All of them have undergone the shock of destruction and the trauma of exodus to a new culture; and all of them have reasonable grounds to fear that their lives would be in some degree of danger if they went back to their respective villages. Some Western scholars have solved this possible ambiguity in the terms by calling Tamils from the North and Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka "*Eelam Tamils*,"¹⁰ with no mention of their political status.

Another objection to the use of the term 'refugee' (*akati*) comes from the Tamil leaders both in Sri Lanka and in London. They insist that we should replace the term 'refugee' for the more appropriate and all-inclusive expression 'displaced Tamils' (*pulam peyarntōr*)¹¹. This has three merits. First, it avoids the natural embarrassment to Sri Lankan government by not mentioning that some vast segments of its population can be 'persecuted' for their political persuasions; second, it is purely descriptive and has no

¹⁰ *Eelam* is an ancient Tamil name for Sri Lanka, but the name became illegal after militants started using it to define a separate state for Tamils as *Tamil Eelam*. It is also nowadays loaded with political implications. The word *Eelam* may be purely descriptive; for Sri Lankan Tamils it is also evocative and affective; it is loaded with a powerful emotional charge, sometimes a volcanically explosive charge. It means the Tamil Motherland, a land where Tamil language is spoken and Tamil gods are worshipped; a land where their ancestors are buried and where they hope one day to be buried themselves. It would be inappropriate for me, a Tamil from Jaffna area, to use the word *Eelam* in the present study with detachment and objectivity. I still cling to the use of the expression 'Sri Lankan Tamil refugees' in all its ambiguity. See, for instance, Selvakone, G. M., "Psycho Social Changes Faced by the *Eelam* Tamils in Canada (Its Consequences and Possible Solutions)", unpublished seminar paper, July, 1998.

¹¹ The researcher observed that Tamil daily papers and magazines published in London use the word *pulam peyarntōr* ('displaced Tamils') to refer to refugee Tamils in Sri Lanka and Western countries.

emotional or political implications; third, it makes clear the distinction between the 'assimilated Tamils' (also called 'the professionals') who came as professionals or students before 1980 and never formed clusters of Tamilhood in London or elsewhere, and the Tamils who came as a consequence of the present war, formed Tamil clusters in London as in many other Western countries, tenaciously cling to their culture (*kalāccāram*), resist assimilation to the new culture, and are working as non-professional labourers.

Nevertheless we are reluctant to adopt this terminology in the present study and use the term 'refugee' with the inclusiveness mentioned above. Mainly because the interviewees never describe themselves as 'displaced Tamils,' and often use the terms 'refugee' and 'political asylum'; so we can speak of 'internal refugees' within Sri Lanka, 'external refugees' in London, and the 'professionals' who would be offended if we identified them as refugees. Our study focuses almost exclusively on the Tamil refugees from the Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka who came to London after 1980, and will touch only superficially the 'professionals' who had come here before that date, and their children who have been born and/or brought up in this country. Many of these refugees have made the transition from their ancestral folk Hinduism to All-Tamil Pentecostal Christianity. When referring to this religious emigration, they never say 'my conversion' (*en iratcippu*), but generally prefer the expression 'change my religion' (*samaya marram*).

The word religion (*samayam*) also presents some difficulties and requires some explanation. For operational purposes we here understand religion as 'a coherent system of myths, rituals and codes of conduct shared by a community.'¹² The myths (*purāṇaṅkaḷ*) of a given community or culture provide the world-view shared by its members. They explain that things are the way they are because of some events that happened at the beginning, or for some other inscrutable reasons not subject to demonstration. In our use of this term 'myth' we avoid any value judgements as to its truthfulness or lack of it. Thus, one of the myths of Hinduism is that Lord *Krishna* is an

¹² For the contemplated concepts of myths, ritual and code of conduct, and its applications see Berger, Peter, *The Sacred Canopy – Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, *op.cit.*, pp. 51-52 & 90-91. See also Tambiah, S. J., *A Performative Approach to Ritual*. London: British Academy, 1981, pp. 119-130 and Malefijt, Annemarie de Wall, *Religion and Culture: An Introduction to Anthropology of Religion*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968, p. 11.

avatar of the god *Viṣṇu*, who manifested himself to the warrior *Arjuna* under the guise of his charioteer.¹³ In similar vein we call the incarnation of God's only Son in the person of Jesus of Nazareth a Christian myth. As an example of a secular myth, we may mention the widespread conviction that the indefinite progress of science and its application to the manufacturing of mechanical instruments, so as to increase the production of foodstuffs and other commodities, will result in a proportional increase of the happiness of humankind, and eventually will lead to the abolition of war and the establishment of a happy universal society. The word 'myth' will be stripped of any connotation of fictional or untrue story.

The myths of a religious system are re-presented or re-enacted in the periodic rituals performed by individuals or groups who uphold those myths. So, by the term 'ritual' (*saṭaṅkukal*) we here understand a whole "constellation of symbolic actions, movements, gestures and words that are intended to celebrate, re-present and re-enact a myth upheld by the group"; rituals can be as simple as shaking hands after a contract, or making the sign of the cross in a blessing, or an arduous pilgrimage to the sacred mountain of *Kataragama*¹⁴ in Sri Lanka, or the Holy Land of Israel. All those actions, movements, gestures and words have a symbolic meaning, and point to a reality beyond the external actions themselves. We could say that all rituals share in a sacramental reality, since they are "external signs that signify an internal reality."¹⁵ Some religious systems such as Hinduism contain an almost unlimited number of symbols and rituals, as unlimited is the number of gods of its pantheon. Other religious systems, for instance Tamil Pentecostal Christianity in London, contain a very limited number of prescribed rituals in

¹³ The *Bhagavad-Gita*, inserted as Book XIII in the great Indian epic *Mahabharatta* by Valmiki, is the classic text for this myth. Also see Parrinder, E. Geoffrey, *The Significance of the Bhagavad-Gita for Christian Theology*. London: Dr William's Trust, 1968.

¹⁴ *Kataragama* (the British named it as Adam's Peak) is believed to be a holy mountain in Sri Lanka. On top there is something like a gigantic footprint on the rock. For Buddhist pilgrims it is the footprint of the Buddha when he came flying to Lanka during his life time; for folk Catholic pilgrims it is Adam's Foot; it is sacred to Buddhists, Hindus and Christians. Pilgrims climb the mountain to obtain merits and supplicate the gods who dwell there. For example, see Wirz, von Paul [Doris Berta Pralle (tr.)], *Katharagama: The Holiest Place in Ceylon*. Colombo: Lake House, 1966

¹⁵ The standard definition of sacrament is "an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace," as we can find in most catechisms and other formularies. See also "Sacrament" in Forrester, Duncan, et al., *Encounter with God*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Limited, 1983, pp. 57-61.

comparison with Hinduism, but they are never exempt from rituals: even the way Pentecostal Tamils in London devoutly and conspicuously carry their bibles is in itself a ritual, though not a prescribed ritual.

Religious as well as social myths are not immutable formulations of events that happened once and for all. The world view they convey changes from one generation to another, from one mode of living to another;¹⁶ even in two neighbouring villages they may exhibit different variations of the same mythical theme. If the myths of religion change, the rituals will also change correspondingly, though admittedly the rituals may tend in some cultures to remain rigidly fixed (as in the case of tightly integrated homogeneous cultures), even when the myths they re-present and re-enact are no longer held as valid explanations of reality; but rituals without the supporting myths tend to become picturesque folklore,¹⁷ retaining only vestigial remains of the original myths. It is no wonder that the code of ethics formerly sanctioned by the myths and also expressed in the social rituals will undergo a radical transformation when the mode of life of the community changes radically or settles into a totally alien habitat. It is the young generation which challenges the codes of conduct and questions the validity of the ancient myths. The generation gap, or even the struggle between generations, is common in open societies, a recognised and accepted phenomenon; in closed, tightly integrated

¹⁶ Peter Berger discusses this phenomenon under 'institutionalisation', 'legitimation', 'internalisation' and 'transformation'. See Berger, Peter L. & Luckmann, Thomas, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Penguin Books, 1967, pp. 72-151 For an explanation on 'religious field' in Sri Lanka, See Houtart, Francois, *Religion and ideology in Sri Lanka*. Bangalore: TPI, 1974, pp.11-12.

¹⁷The following incident in my life illustrates the point. When my children were still babies, I shaved their heads, as was customary in my village. Somebody asked me why I, a Christian minister, had done such a thing and what I meant by it. I answered that by doing it their hair would grow strong. Then I learnt that, by doing this act, Tamils signify that the baby is fully incorporated into the family. Kenneth David states this vigorously and clearly: "A new-born child is not a social person. Until the haircutting ceremony (on day 16 or 31, depending child's caste), the creature is not socially recognised as existing; there is no specific Tamil lexeme applied to this preparation (...). The onset of social personhood is then marked by the removal of hair from the head." David, Kenneth, "Hidden Powers: Cultural and Socio-Economic Accounts of Jaffna Women." in Wadley, Susan S. (ed.), *The Powers of Tamil Women*. New York: Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University, 1980, pp. 94-5.

societies there are stronger sanctions for the old ways,¹⁸ and innovation is frowned upon if not openly condemned.

The code of conduct (*palakka valakam*) of a religious community derives from, and determined by, the myths that this community upholds and the rituals it performs. All religious systems contain a corresponding code of ethics, and all codes of ethics (no matter how secular they may look or pretend to be) have a religious origin and foundation, a religious inspiration and sanction.¹⁹ Religious codes of conduct prescribe what is proper and improper, holy and unholy, pleasing to the deity and offensive to the deity, auspicious or inauspicious, permitted or taboo, good or evil. All these distinctions have a religious origin and divine sanction.

Myths, rituals and codes may undergo many metamorphoses along the course of centuries and millennia, but the same myths appear again and again in a different garb, sometimes with beneficial, other times with catastrophic effects. Some mythical themes are practically present in all cultures under different forms. For instance, the myth of the “chosen people” seems to be universal in its scope. In modern as well as in ancient times it has been used to encourage and justify the conquest and colonising of entire continents, the subjection of entire races into slavery, the holocaust of entire ethnic populations (such as Jews and Gypsies) by the ‘pure Aryans’²⁰ and to promote all kinds of tribalism, ethnocentrism and consequent reprobation of those who are different, who do not belong. In the case of Sri Lanka, the myth of the chosen people has been the ideological instrument to justify the supremacy of the Sinhala majority and the attempts to keep the Dravidian Tamil minorities in subjection to the Sinhala Aryan majority. The permanence of ancient myths, rituals and codes under modern garb is eloquently expressed by Octavio Paz, the famous Mexican philosopher and poet:

Contemporary man has rationalised the myths, but he has not been able to destroy them. Many of our scientific truths, like the majority of our moral, political and philosophical conceptions, are only new

¹⁸ “Maximal success in socialisation is likely to occur in societies with very simple division of labour and minimal distribution of knowledge.” See Berger, Peter & Luckmann, Thomas, *The Social Construction of Reality. op.cit.*, p. 183.

¹⁹ See Berger, Peter, *The Sacred Canopy – Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion. op.cit.*, pp. 90-95.

²⁰ See Miles, Robert, *Racism*. London & New York: Routledge, 1989, pp. 58-60.

ways of expressing tendencies that were embodied earlier in mythical forms. The rational language of our day can barely hide the ancient myths behind them. Utopias – especially modern political utopias (despite their rationalistic disguises) – are violently concentrated expressions of the tendency that causes every society to imagine a golden age from which the social group was exiled and to which man will return on the Day of Days. Modern fiestas – political meetings, parades, demonstrations and other ritual acts – prefigure the advent of that day of redemption. Everyone hopes society will return to its original freedom, and man to his primitive purity. Then time will cease to torment us with doubts, with the necessity of choosing between good and evil, the just and the unjust, the real and the imaginary. The kingdom of the fixed present, of perpetual communion, will be re-established. Reality will tear off its masks, and at last we will be able to know both it and our fellow men. ²¹

1.2 OVERVIEW: CHAPTERS

In **Chapter 2** of this work I shall present the most fundamental elements of Tamil *kalāccāram* (culture) from the perspective of the Tamil exiles in London, using their own words as far as possible. I shall listen to them describing their social and cultural life ‘from outside’ or even ‘from below’, since most of them consider their present state in London as a ‘fallen state.’ I shall also briefly describe the sudden disintegration of the basic pillars of Tamil *kalāccāram*: the house/family, the temple/worship, and the village/community, and now in London the devaluation of Tamil *kalāccāram* in a dominant culture where people speak differently, worship differently, relate to each other differently, live differently and die differently. I call this chapter ‘From Integration to Disintegration’, and the original integration of the Tamil *kalāccāram* in Sri Lanka will be the main theme of the chapter. Of course, the reader will expect a full ethnographic description of the Tamil cultural pattern in Sri Lanka; that is not our main concern.

After the trauma of disintegration of their houses and families and villages and resulting exile, came the shock of having to live inevitably in a totally strange culture and the perceived fall from an ordered state (cosmos) into a turmoil and confusion (chaos). This state I shall call a ‘state of anomie’ or ‘anomic state’, and I shall deal with it in **Chapter 3** of this work.

²¹ Paz. Octavio, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. New York: Grove Press, 1961, pp. 211-12.

In **Chapter 4** I shall focus on the main purpose and the theme of this enquiry, the study of religious conversion of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees living in London. It is not my intention to study the process of socialisation or acculturation, but the process of ‘inculturation’ of Christianity into a non-western culture, and specifically the event and process of religious conversion of many Tamil refugees from the pattern (myths, rituals, codes) of folk Hinduism to a new pattern of beliefs, practices and ethics of a peculiar variety of Pentecostal Christianity, namely the All-Tamil Pentecostal churches in London. There have been significant changes in religion among Hindus in London, and there are significant numbers of people who have opted for a change of religion. It is certainly not possible to understand Sri Lankan Tamil religious change apart from the understanding of their corresponding culture, because culture and religion are inseparable²²: *kalāccāram* is pervaded with Hindu religiosity, and Hindu religion interprets and gives divine sanction to Tamil *kalāccāram*.²³ In other words, if there is a cultural ‘paradigm shift’, we can reasonably expect a corresponding religious ‘paradigm shift’.

In **Chapter 5** I shall look at the communities to find out how they are being consolidated by adapting and re-adapting themselves, their programmes and activities, to the changing reality of Tamil life in London. Can they maintain the initial vitality and fervour and joy that are so evident now? As the present members are being acculturated into a competitive society, can the Tamil churches retain their collaborative character that makes them so attractive to Tamil refugees? As the war is flagging in Sri Lanka, fewer refugees are claiming and being granted political asylum in London; will there be a corresponding decline in the membership of the churches? Many of the hard-working refugees are moving upwards and outwards in the social, educational and economic scale: will they retain their Pentecostal affiliation, or will they rather seek affiliation to

²² Francis, Dayanandan T., *Tamil Saivism*. Madras: The Tamil Theological Book Club, 1972, p. 93.

²³ “The *Saivite* in his body, in the body-mind-life-integration of his personality worships God. And holds interior communion with Him.” See Francis, T Dayanandan, *The Relevance of Hindu Ethos for Christian Presence: A Tamil Perspective*. Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1989, p. 55.

English speaking churches with members of a higher social standard?²⁴ Children growing up in London and attending English schools, after their initial 'culture shock,' are becoming more fluent in English than in Tamil: will they attend Tamil speaking churches when they are free to do so? We shall discuss these and other questions crucial to the preservation of Tamil identity in the Tamil churches in London. All institutions and movements (religious, political, cultural and biological) aim at their self-perpetuation: what are the mechanisms the Tamil churches in London are developing to assure self-perpetuation and avoid progressive decline and eventual extinction? This chapter is written after two visits to the communities, two years after my research in the field.

We end our study with a meditation that I call **Concluding Reflections**. By Conclusion I do not mean that the case is closed, because the term then would be inappropriate for our study; far from reaching the goal and closing the door behind us, at the end of our journey I open a new door for further exploration and invite others to begin the journey where I ended it.

1.3 CHANGE OF RELIGION: A PARADIGM SHIFT?

In some theological circles it is customary to apply the expression 'paradigm shift' to signify important changes of theological opinions and emphases.²⁵ The expression has enjoyed great popularity in theological circles, though originally it was applied to scientific revolutions. The most serious and even monumental attempt to apply Thomas Kuhn's insights into the scientific 'paradigm shifts' to the theology, history and attitudes

²⁴ In societies with a high degree of religious pluralism and corresponding competition to win members to the various denominations there seems to be a correlation between economic standards of the people and their religious affiliation; this is observable especially in the USA. When families' there move from one suburban area to another, they go 'shopping for religion' to adhere to the church that suits best to their social and economic standard. Will the same phenomenon happen among Tamils in London areas? See Niebuhr, H. Richard, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1929. Cf. Packard, Vance, "The Long Road from Pentecostal to Episcopal" in his *The Status Seekers: an exploration of class behaviour in America*. New York: Pocket Books, 25th printing, 1971, pp.173-85. More recently, Cimino, Richard, and Lattin, Don, *Shopping for Faith – American Religion in the New Millennium*. San Francisco, California: Joseph Bass Publishers, 1998.

²⁵ See "Can Ducks Turn into Rabbits: Theories and paradigms" in Middlemiss, David, *Interpreting Charismatic Experience*. London: SCM Press Ltd., 1996, pp. 127-155.

of the Christian church is Hans Kung's work *Christianity: Essence, History and Future*.²⁶ There he interprets and describes the history of the Christian Church as a succession of religious paradigm shifts that the Christian Church has undergone along the two millennia of her history. At one point he makes the important distinction between 'macro-paradigm' (encompassing the whole church), 'meso-paradigm' (encompassing a large portion of the life of the church), and 'micro-paradigm'²⁷(encompassing only local churches or some aspects of theological outlook) to denote the varying degrees of sweeping transformations that they the successive 'paradigm shifts' have entailed. I think we can attempt to transfer the concept of 'paradigm shift' to the study of religious conversion of individuals and societies at large, considering them only as 'micro-paradigms,' and apply to the Tamil Hindu community under scrutiny.

Thomas Kuhn's theory of scientific revolutions can be applied to a theory of 'change of religion' (conversion) as much as to a theory of 'change **in** religion' (transformation of religious practices) or in religious opinions (theology). This is how Kuhn defines a scientific paradigm from two distinct viewpoints:

On the one hand, it stands for the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community. On the other, it denotes one sort of element in that constellation, the concrete puzzle-solutions which, employed as models or examples, can replace explicit rules as a basis for the solution of the remaining puzzles of normal science.²⁸

For as long as this paradigm explains all observable phenomena and leaves nothing important unexplained, the paradigm is considered valid and remains unaltered. But then scientists may observe new phenomena or begin to see the familiar ones in unfamiliar ways, and begin to ask valid questions that the old paradigm cannot answer in a satisfactory way.²⁹ Scientists begin to feel a kind of disenchantment with such a paradigm, but may adhere to it until a better and more convincing explanation of the

²⁶ See Kung, Hans, *Christianity: Essence, History and Future*. New York: Continuum, 1995.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

²⁸ See Kuhn, Thomas S., *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996 (3rd ed.), p. 175.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 52-65.

problems and answers to the hard questions are found.³⁰ Then a new revolutionary paradigm may appear to explain things in a more comprehensive and convincing way.³¹ A growing number of scientists become convinced of the validity of the new paradigm, abandon the old, and form what Kuhn calls a 'scientific community.' The community remains the same, but their world-view has been radically transformed.³²

We can establish a parallel in the case of religion. We have defined religion as a system of myths, rituals and codes of conduct. We may call such a system a "religious paradigm." For as long as that paradigm offers a plausible world-view and satisfies the needs of the religious community that upholds it, it is very improbable that the paradigm will undergo significant changes. But supposing this religious community radically changes its way of life, from a nomadic pastoral existence to a sedentary agricultural existence, for example, it is probable that the myths, rituals and codes of the nomadic community will undergo a radical change particularly in myths of creation, rituals of fertility and corresponding codes of conduct. This is what actually happened to the semi-nomadic tribes of Israel after the conquest and occupation of the fertile lands of Canaan, with the corresponding shift from a pastoral to an agricultural mode of subsistence. The process reached its climax with the erection of a permanent Temple for the ancestral deity of Israel and the corresponding radical transformation of the worship patterns. Again, when the central temple and the monarchy were destroyed and the Israelites went into exile and were later dispersed throughout the inhabited world, the Jews had to adapt and re-adapt their religious myths, rituals and the application of the Torah. Temple worship was no longer the centre of their religious life; sacrifices had to be abolished; the Synagogue became the centre, and the Holy Torah the main repository of their religion.

Now, the mode of life of Sri Lankan Tamil villagers has undergone the most radical change in the twinkling of an eye (Steen calls them 'jet' refugees³³). Can we reasonably

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 66-76.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 77-91.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 111-135.

³³ Tamils who had settled agricultural culture are now after few hours of air travel becoming wanderers among the industrialised cities of the world. See Steen, Ann-Belinda, *The Contextual Difference of Refugee Resettlement: Sri Lankan Tamils in Denmark and England*. Unpublished public lecture paper, Copenhagen: Institute of Anthropology, 10 May 1992, p. 3.

expect that they will preserve the old religious paradigm in their new habitat in a gigantic metropolis? Is it not reasonable to expect that they will adopt the religious paradigm of their new habitat? If so, they will abandon the old paradigm as no longer valid, and cling to the new paradigm as the only valid one. It certainly looks very reasonable, but we should not impose reasonableness into history. History does not seem to follow immutable laws, as nature seems to do. The following are the kind of questions that need to be answered.

First: Are Sri Lankan Tamils disenchanted with their ancestral Hinduism after settling in London? In other words, do they feel abandoned by their gods, orphaned in a land that is outside the domain of their gods? Will they abandon their gods in the long or short run? My findings, still provisional, point to this answer: No. Most of them are not disenchanted with Hinduism; they are building temples for their gods and adapting worship patterns to fit into the weather in London, the working hours, the new solar calendar (instead of their lunar calendar marking the seasons and festivals) with its weekly, monthly and yearly seasons, and so forth.³⁴ All my informants remark that “it is not quite the same,” “churches converted into *kōvil(s)* do not create the same devout atmosphere” (Vimalan), but Hindu religion is still alive and seems to enjoy good health in London, with due adaptations.³⁵ Thus young Sathish remarks:

Another important religious change among Tamils here: People have altered religious festivals to suit London holidays. For example, the Hindu New Year falls in April; in Sri Lanka it is a holiday and we can celebrate it with all splendour; but in London it is a working day. Aha! But if you go to a Hindu temple in this city on the 1st of January, you would see that there is no place to park your car, because so many Hindus have come to the temple for worship. I do not know why

³⁴In 1977 there were 307,000 Hindus living in Britain: 70% of Gujarati origin, 15% from Punjab and the remaining 15% came from Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Sri Lanka. They wanted to lead their “religious life in an alien cultural milieu.” See Burghart, Richard (ed.), *Hinduism in Great Britain: The Perpetuation of Religion in an Alien Cultural Milieu*. London: Tevistock Publications, 1987, pp. 8-14.

³⁵ Similar adaptations were noticeable among Indian Hindus in Britain. For instance, Richard Burghart observed, “Each regional group, however, preferred its own regionally specific procedures of worship. In order that the temple might thrive, attracting as large a community as possible, the two groups (Gujarati and Punjab Hindus) found themselves obliged to standardise their procedures of worship.” *Ibid.*, p. 13.

people have changed the dates, but I think the reason is that it is more convenient for them. People celebrate the Tamil New Year, with all its functions, on the day of an English New Year!

We see here a change **in** religion rather than a change **of** religion. There is continuity and identity in the midst of change. We can see that even the sacredness of times and spaces can undergo substantial changes, but the substance of the festivals remains. Hindus do not feel that they have been left orphaned from their gods; in fact, most of them have travelled with a few pictures of their favourite deities and have placed them in the privacy of their rooms, though often they complain that they cannot concentrate in their prayers, because, “you know, it’s not exactly the same.” Sometimes they claim that they cannot concentrate on prayer because meat is kept in their refrigerators (example, Hanna).

Second: Is it not reasonable to expect that Tamil refugees will abandon their religious paradigm sooner or later and embrace the religious paradigm of their new land? It seems likely that they will say with the Ruth of the Hebrew Scriptures:

for where you go I will go,
And where you lodge I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God;
where you die I will die,
and there will I be buried.³⁶

Paradoxically, what one might expect to be obvious behaviour does not necessarily take place; while it seems obvious that Tamil refugees will join the mainline churches of the dominant culture, eagerly accept their myths, worship their god and join the Anglican, Methodist, Roman Catholic or Baptist churches; but in fact having settled on the fringes of London’s society, they join the fringe churches of Pentecostalism. However, the Tamils who came as professionals and students and were eager for a swift and complete assimilation into the new social habitat can be seen actively participating in the mainline churches, worshipping in English in the English way and meeting occasionally or

³⁶ Ruth 1.16-17 (RSV)

periodically with other Tamils for a nostalgic service in Tamil.³⁷ The Sri Lankan Tamil refugees under scrutiny in this study seem reluctant to undergo a complete assimilation, are adamant to preserve their Tamilhood, and have joined All-Tamil Pentecostal churches established by Tamils in the Tamil ghettos of London. So have they shifted their religious paradigm? We cannot anticipate here the results of our research, and certainly the data collected so far do not warrant any generalisation. One aspect deserves careful attention from the beginning, namely: in all the cases of “change of religion” I have met in London, without exception, first the Tamils joined the loving, caring and joyful community; and only afterwards did they learn about its myths, rituals and systems of church discipline and individual conduct. Not the other way round. This is an important missiological finding, which confirms what other missiologists have found

³⁷ When professional Tamils started leaving Sri Lanka, there were Christians among them. These Christian professionals organised social gatherings among themselves during Good Friday, Easter, and Christmas. In the 1972, a regular monthly service began as ‘London Tamil Christian Congregation’ (LTCC) at Methodist Church in Putney. However, when Sri Lankan Tamil refugees started flocking to the UK after 1983, some Christians among them requested a weekly service at Putney, but professional Tamils were uncomfortable with this request, as they were members of British churches in their own local areas and could not attend weekly services in London. Daniel, a member of the London Tamil Christian Congregation (LTCC) said to the researcher: “We were slow to respond to their requests. We are mainly from the middle class in Sri Lanka. When a request like this was put forward for discussion, we did not respond to it immediately. I think we were very slow.” However, these issues were hotly debated and widely different opinions were expressed. Some professional Tamils were in favour of weekly services in Putney, although the vast majority opposed it. Daniel continues: “Some members in the church requested an active ministry, but their voice was small. The majority of the committee members are well settled in the UK and do not want to change the existing church pattern. Some active members felt that they were let down by the committee, and decided to leave the church.” Some members who supported the idea of weekly services started another Sri Lankan Tamil congregation in the Church of England Church in Tooting, along with some young Christian refugee Tamils. They started weekly Tamil worship services and invited a lay preacher from Sri Lanka to do pastoral work among them. The congregation is now attached to Church of England. Still more recently (1999), the same lay preacher seceded from that church and has formed his own free church in another area in London.

especially in Africa.³⁸ Can we infer, then, that there is not a religious ‘paradigm shift’ in the case of conversions from world religions? Let us see.

In Thomas Kuhn’s study we find the following sequence: a) General satisfaction with the dominant scientific paradigm; b) some begin to ask hard questions and so undercut the sacrosanct authority of the prevalent accepted paradigm; c) a new paradigm is proposed as a better way to explain the new facts and answer the new questions; d) the new paradigm is widely accepted; e) scientists form, so to speak, a ‘scientific community’ around the new paradigm. Is this the sequence in religious conversion? First, they begin by joining the new community and participate in its life, and may sing “behold what a good and joyful thing is for brothers and sisters to dwell in unity and harmony” (Ps. 133:1). Second, they learn about the myths, rituals and codes of the new community and decide to belong to it fully by confessing the faith and receiving baptism. Third, they decide to abandon the old Hindu paradigm and invite other Hindus to join the alternative community (though this is not the general norm). The religious paradigm shift has been completed, but in an order that seems least logical and a sequence that seems inverted. If this is the case, all apologetics and polemics of which missionaries of old and pastors of today appear to hold dear are exercises in futility, and this may account for much of the numerical failure of 500 years of evangelisation: they have tried to convince the heads without moving the hearts; to persuade by erecting formidable mental structures, and forgot to build simple loving and caring communities. The oft repeated words of the martyr Archbishop Romero ring with truth: “Let us stop building cathedrals and begin to edify the church.” Shall we say, then, that there is no religious paradigm shift at all? But we should be cautious and confess that such shifts are not so swift, thorough and irreversible as they are presented by some authors who deal with the phenomenon of

³⁸ “A African tribe called ‘Kikuyu’ accepted Christianity during missionary activity in Africa. There is an important point to note. ‘Kikuyu’ were cultivators and there were other tribes as well. (...) At the same time people were allowed to change their tribe in a public function, by accepting the adopted tribe’s religion and customs. This political/religious ritual was called ‘Guciaruo’. When the Kikuyu accepted Christianity and were baptised, they pre-eminently accepted the new economic role and the life style that went with it. For them accepting Christianity was another ‘Guciaruo’. See Ranger, Terence, “The Local and the Global in Southern African Religious History” in Hefner, Robert W. (Ed.), *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1993, pp. 65-95.

religious conversion.³⁹ This is important, at least in an Asian context, where Christianity except in the Philippines, is far from constituting the dominant religion or culture.⁴⁰

A further observation on the terms 'conversion' (*iraṭcippu*) and 'convert' (*iraṭcippu aṭaintavar*) is appropriate here. One hears these words in reference to the experience and status of others, but never to not for the speaker's experience, process and decision of conversion. For this the expression 'to change my religion' or a similar phrase is used. Instead of the word convert either 'Christian' or 'born again Christian' is used, but I heard nobody say 'I am a convert'; this is exemplified in the following anecdote. In the initial stages of my field research I went to a Tamil Pentecostal Church to attend the worshipping service and participate in the subsequent get-together in the hall. The Pastor had introduced me to the congregation and announced the nature and purpose of my research. A lady approached to me during the get-together:

She: See that young lady over there?

Me: The one setting the tables?

She: Yes. Her name is Jothi. She is a new convert. She may have an interesting story to tell.

Jothi was a vivacious and energetic young mother, busy organising and helping. I introduced myself and began:

Me: I understand you are a new convert...

Jothi: You shouldn't say that I am a 'convert' to Christianity! It's true that I have seen God through Jesus, but I don't believe that's the only way to realise God.

1.4 METHODOLOGY

Jothi's firm protest taught me several lessons, beside the discovery that the word 'convert' should be avoided or used with the utmost caution. First, my notions of religious conversion stumbled at their very first encounter with empirical reality;

³⁹ For example, see Costas, Orlando E., "Conversion as a Complex Experience: A personal case study" in *Gospel in Context*. Vol. 1, #3, July 1978, pp. 14-24.

⁴⁰ Pieris, Aloysius, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Limited, 1988, p. 59.

correspondingly, my preconceived expectations were shattered.⁴¹ Second, I had a careful questionnaire in my head and wanted to ask people the same questions in order to find what I was looking for, but Jothi showed me that I should listen first and learn what the people wanted to communicate. Third, the very notion of conversion from one world religion to another may be questionable: perhaps it is not what the authors say, or what the 'converts' tell the authors, because they think that they know what the researcher wants to hear, and may tell him in order to please him. I decided then to change my approach and let the people speak about what they felt was important for them, not for the researcher. Since all the conversations were conducted in Tamil, in a relaxed and familiar atmosphere (their own homes), with no time limitations, I believe this approach gave good results;⁴² at least people did not put on a mask of piety when talking about their adventures and misadventures.

Conversion to the Christian message, I have found, is first a conversion to a community and only later learning about the doctrinal tenets of that community; hence the importance of the study of culture and society for the genuine understanding of conversion from one world religion into another, the subject of our study. In our case, the content of our theologising will be the human experience of religious conversion (or religious emigration) from Hinduism to Christianity; and not an extended technical treatment of the subject of conversion in the light of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures and the authority of the early Fathers. The process and decision to change religion will be presented by quoting the words of my interviewees in such a way that the theology contained in them may become apparent, and readers will be able to make their own theological reflections. I shall try to elicit narratives of the events and the subjects own reflections on them. I have no criterion by which to judge whether a case of conversion is genuine or not. For me a person has become a Christian when he or she says so.⁴³ If

⁴¹ See Edwards, Jonathan [John Smith (ed.)], *Religious Affections*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959, Part II, Ch VII, pp. 340-341; see also "Conversion" in James, William, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. New York: The Modern Library, 1936, (Lectures IX and X), pp. 186-253 and Nock, Arthur D., *Conversion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933.

⁴² See Bernard, Russell H., *Research Methods in Cultural Anthropology*. California, England, New Delhi: SAGE Publication Ltd., 1988; Sanjek, Roger, *Field Notes: The Making of Anthropology*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990; Atkinson, Paul, *Ethnographic Imagination: textual construction of reality*. London: Routledge, 1990.

⁴³ See Rambo, Lewis R., *Understanding Religious Conversion*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993, p. 7.

we decide to use a harmonious combination of methods, we must find an alternative definition of theology. Here we adopt a definition that has become current among Asian Christian theologians: Theology is a Christian reflection on human experience.⁴⁴ In this case, theology does not start from above (the data of divine revelation), but from below (the human experience and questions), and the theological method undergoes a radical transformation from 'above' to 'below' as its starting point. The two perspectives do not exclude each other, but are, in the end, mutually complementary. With this in mind, the primary content of theology is no longer the data of divine revelation that seeks and comes down to encounter man in his historical predicament, but the human predicament and questioning that seeks an answer from divine revelation. Divine revelation and corresponding Christian faith, in this instance, come as a second step, as a reflection to illumine the human experience and give it meaning, purpose, direction and ultimate destination.

Religious conversion is often preceded and accompanied by a deep inner crisis and there are obvious pathological aspects in many cases of religious conversion and belonging adherence.⁴⁵ Nevertheless not all cases of conversion show any indication of "religious pathology" unless the psychologist is initially prejudiced against religious experiences, when he/she will speak of the inner mechanisms used by the person to escape what Peter Berger calls the 'nightmare world of anomy' or 'anomic terror'⁴⁶ and solve his/her acute crisis by taking refuge in a religious community. Since conversion is a profound human experience that affects and often transforms the entire personality of the individual undergoing this process, psychologists have something important to contribute to the

⁴⁴ D. A. Thangasamy points out that Asian theologians now feel that Christians cannot make exclusive claims of God and say, "if somebody else's findings of the truth differ from ours he is in the wrong". Instead Christians must learn to reflect on human experience. It does not mean accepting everything, but reflecting and discovering higher truths by thinking together as human beings rather than "arguing against each other". See Thangasamy, D. A., "Views of Some Christian Thinkers in India on Conversion and Baptism" in Taylor, Richard W (ed.), *Religion and Society: The First Twenty-five Years 1953-1978*. Madras: The Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, Bangalore, 1982, p. 280-281.

⁴⁵ For a more detailed explanation of 'inner crisis', see Chapter Two: "Conversion: The Emotional Matrix of RDP" in Alves, Rubem A.[John Drury (tr.)], *Protestantism and Repression: A Brazilian Case Study*. London: SCM Press Ltd., 1985, pp. 22-46.

⁴⁶ Berger, Peter, *The Sacred Canopy – Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. op.cit., pp. 24 & 90.

understanding of the psychic mechanisms of conversion; but often they succumb to the temptation of reductionism by stating that “religious conversion is nothing other than...” And then, in their flight from the ‘theological dogmatism’ of many, they fall into the trap of ‘psychological dogmatism’ of legion.

Theologians and psychologists tend to consider the phenomenon and process of conversion as events that happen to the individual, and seem inclined to study conversion as a series of cases isolated from each other. Sociologists and anthropologists, by contrast, begin first with the community and from the social and cultural reality of people derive individual traits, events and processes. People live in an ordered universe made for themselves and by themselves;⁴⁷ by imposing an ordering principle (*nomos*) their own habitat, they no longer live under the terror of the unpredictable, but their habitat becomes a *cosmos*, an orderly universe, with a normative regularity in the daily life. But this *cosmos* is always precarious, and a return to a normless chaos is a constant threat. This normless chaos we shall call *anomie*, and we shall see how right Peter Berger is in associating anomy (he uses the English variant ‘anomy’) with ‘terror’ both in the individual and in the community. Peter Berger uses these expressions ‘anomic terror’ and ‘terror of anomy’ quite often in his works on sociology of religion and sociology of knowledge. The following illuminating passage has helped me to formulate the state of Tamil refugees in London as an ‘*anomic state*’ and the religious conversion of many as an escape from *anomie*:

Every socially constructed *nomos* must face the constant possibility of its collapse into anomy. Seen in the perspective of society, every *nomos* is an area of meaning carved out of a vast mass of an area of meaninglessness, a small clearing of lucidity in a formless, dark, always ominous jungle. Seen in the perspective of the individual, every *nomos* represents the bright ‘dayside’ of life, tenuously held onto against the sinister shadows of the ‘night.’ In both perspectives, every *nomos* is an edifice erected in the face of the potent and alien forces of chaos. This chaos must be kept at bay at all costs. To ensure this, every society

⁴⁷ Peter Berger states this vigorously and convincingly: “Society is a dialectical phenomenon in that it is a human product, and nothing but a human product, that yet continuously acts back upon its producer. Society is a product of man. It has no other being except that which is bestowed upon it by human activity and consciousness. There can be no social reality apart from man. Yet it may also be stated that man is a product of society. Every individual biography is an episode within the history of society, which both precedes and survives it.” *Ibid.*, p. 3. The entire chapter on “Religion and World-Construction” of that work is highly relevant for this argument.

develops procedures that assist its members to remain 'reality-oriented' (that is, to remain within the reality as 'officially' defined) and to 'return to reality' (that is, to return from the marginal spheres of 'irreality' to the socially established nomos). (...) the individual is provided by society with various methods to stave off the nightmare world of anomy and to stay within the safe boundaries of the established nomos.⁴⁸

The event of religious conversion is not merely an individual experience, because humans do not and cannot live in isolation from their culture and society. All authentically human events happen in a cultural and social milieu because humans are essentially social and cultural beings, creatures of their own creation, as we shall explain in Chapter 2. Consequently in the study of religious conversion we must not set aside the social and cultural conditions and determinations that may be also the pre-dispositions for the individual decision of religious emigration.

If we listen to theologians alone, we may draw the conclusion that religious conversion is an event that comes from above; if we listen to psychologists alone, we may conclude that conversion is a personal decision that comes only from within; if we listen only to sociologists and cultural anthropologists, we may receive the strong impression that religious conversion is an event that comes from outside. Then we feel that each one of them has a partial view of the truth, and that the truth they find with their methods is only partial, too.

1.5 RESEARCH LOCATION

We assert that reality cannot be perceived in aloneness without relating to other people who live in the same reality. Peter Berger explained this phenomenon and said, "I cannot exist in everyday life without continually interacting and communicating with others."⁴⁹ This was the opinion I had when I prepared my project proposal on Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in London. The proposal was written with all the information that was available at that point and I went to London in November 1996 to do a 'pilot study'. My visit had primary and secondary motives. The primary motive was to explore some of

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24. See also Berger, Peter, and Luckmann, Thomas, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Penguin Books, 1967, pp.102-3.

⁴⁹ Berger, Peter L., & Luckmann, Thomas, *Ibid.*, p. 37.

the issues and assumptions that were discussed in the proposal, but the secondary motive was to meet Tamil speaking people in order to interact with them; I just wanted to feel at home. Tamil speaking Sri Lankans have entered the UK as asylum seekers and live in Greater London in small groups.⁵⁰ I was certain that to understand the people one needs to understand their life in context, but there was a large number of Tamils living within Greater London, which is an extremely complex reality. So I had to reduce the London context to those portions of it where most Sri Lankan Tamils cluster, that I call 'Tamil ghettos,' taking the word 'ghetto' as purely descriptive, with no value connotations. I had entered the UK only seventeen months before and throughout my stay had lived in Edinburgh, so I had relatively little knowledge about the quality of life in London.

On the other hand, Sri Lanka (formally Ceylon) was a British colony from 1796 – 1948⁵¹, and many Sri Lankans today consider London⁵² their 'dreamland'. I was considered one of the luckiest to go to the UK for my education. Commodities made in England are highly trusted in Sri Lanka, although they may prove more costly. Many elderly English speaking Tamils told me in Sri Lanka that they considered the British rule over Ceylon as a favourable rule even today. Not infrequently I have seen photographs of the British Royal Family hanging in Sri Lankan Tamil houses in Sri Lanka. Names of towns and roads, the railway system, schools and universities, tea and rubber plantations, architecture, Christian religious architecture, and numerous other constructions remain as reminders of British rule of Ceylon⁵³.

As a word of caution I want to state that I did not go to London thinking that I knew and understood what British culture and life style meant. I had met only a few British missionaries and some tourists from Britain, and I had seen in Sri Lanka some movies

⁵⁰ Andrew Wingate, who has included a comparative chapter – "Tamils converted to Christianity in Britain" – in his research, observed the same. See Wingate, Andrew D. C. *A Study of Recent Conversion to and from Christianity in the Tamil Area of South India*. Ph.D. Thesis, University of Birmingham, 1995, p. 381.

⁵¹ See De Silva, Chandra, R., *Sri Lanka: A History*. NY: Advent Books, Inc., 1987, pp. 145 157.

⁵² Note that when the interviewees use the word 'London' it does not necessarily mean Greater London. Many Sri Lankans use the word 'London' to mean the UK, Britain, and England generally.

⁵³ The name for the independent and sovereign nation of former Ceylon was adopted in 1972. Often Sri Lankans, even in the printed press, commit the anachronism of referring to colonial Ceylon as 'Sri Lanka.'

and television documentaries produced in Britain. Even now I think it is impossible for me to be at home in the British culture and understand it the way a native does. Even if I had lived in Britain for a longer period, I would have been only a taster of what British culture means. Yet, I could not live it. If I cannot live it, I cannot relate to the native British population as a native Briton. My understanding of the concept of the British as a Sri Lankan is useful to my study, but I am aware that my concepts are not the only possible vehicles for viewing Britain. These are not idle reflections. Let me put it this way: For me in this country the exotic is familiar, and the familiar is exotic. Tamil ways I can understand and appreciate without any effort; British ways I do not understand yet; Tamil language is my mother tongue, and English is still a foreign language to me. This fact has some bearings on my study.

When I study the life of Tamil refugees in London, I cannot say 'them'; I am a Tamil like them; I am not a refugee myself, but all my brothers and sisters are. I have a profound sympathy for them and I love them as much as I love my own; my attitude to them cannot be mere empathy, but also profound sympathy. It is widely accepted now that "anthropology begins at home"⁵⁴; but it is also true that my being a Tamil from Sri Lanka does not make me a cultural anthropologist. When I chose the area of London Tamilhood and the subject of religious conversion as my main theme, I was expected to be the interpreter of Tamil culture in exile to the British people; but how can I be an interpreter if I am not equally conversant in British culture? After my first visit to London Tamil ghettos I felt that, from my comfortable academic perspective, the exotic is my familiar home, and my home in Edinburgh soon began to look exotic to me. This peculiarity was a source of concern to me. If I had to write dispassionately about the Tamils, my own people, how could I divest myself from my own cultural perspective? I thought it would be like jumping out of my own skin.

⁵⁴ I take the expression from B. Malinowski in his Introduction to the ethnographical book of one of his disciples, Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mt Kenya*. New York: Random House – Vintage Books, 1965.

However, I discovered the possibility of combining sympathy with scientific objectivity some recent doctoral theses on Tamil refugees in Norway⁵⁵, Denmark⁵⁶ and Switzerland⁵⁷. I was moved by the sympathetic narrative of horror and solidarity written by Patricia Lawrence, ⁵⁸an American woman who lived in villages around the Batticaloa lagoon during the worst period of violence against Tamils, as well as by the work of a Sri Lankan Tamil anthropologist, Professor Valentine Daniel,⁵⁹ writing sympathetically about the anthropology of cruelty and violence. These and other readings convinced me that my Tamil identity, far from being a hindrance to my study, was a stimulus to study the theme from inside as an insider, rather than from outside as an outsider, with one foot inside and the other outside. I know most of the villages where my interviewees come from, I also had to dig a bunker for my wife and little children to shelter ourselves during the air raids above our heads, and for long periods suffered the agonies of uncertainty of being cut off from my dear ones. Empathy is not enough; I feel a profound sympathy for my interviewees, and they know it. Now they are my friends.

The journey from Edinburgh to London by train took four and half-hours. On 19 November 1996 at 4.30 p.m. I arrived at Kings' Cross station and immediately felt strange and uneasy because it was different from Edinburgh Waverly. The station was very crowded; a kind of happy and strange feeling encircled me at that point. I said to myself, "I am going to be immersed in London, to walk around and experience for myself what it means to live in London, and also to be a Tamil in London."

When I get out of the train, my memories went back to the stories about London told to me by elderly Tamil people whom I had met on several occasions in Sri Lanka. As with

⁵⁵ Fuglend, Oivind, *Between Nation and State: Aspects of Tamil Refugee – migration from Sri Lanka to Norway* (Dissertation for the Dr. of Polit – degree), Institute and Museum of Anthropology, University of Oslo, 1996.

⁵⁶ Steen, Ann-Belinda, *Varieties of the Tamil Refugees Experience in Denmark & England*. (Ph.D. Thesis), Minority Studies, University of Copenhagen, 1993.

⁵⁷ McDowell, Christopher, *A Tamil Asylum Diaspora: Sri Lankan Migration, Settlement and Politics in Switzerland*. Oxford: Berhahn Books, 1996.

⁵⁸ See Lawrence, B. Patricia, *Work of Oracles, Silence of Terror: Notes on the Injury of War in Eastern Sri Lanka*. (Ph.D. Thesis) Submitted to the graduate School of the University of Colorado, 1997.

⁵⁹ Daniel, E. Valentine, *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in An Anthropology of Violence*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996.

nostalgic recollected memories, they stated that the British rulers regarded indigenous Sri Lankan Tamils as one single community, having more or less an equal social importance with the majority Sinhala speaking people in Sri Lanka. They further stated that as long as political representation was on a communal or ethnic basis, there was no real conflict between the interests of the Tamils and the Sinhalese. I vividly remembered how Arthur, a ninety-two year old man who worked in the Governor's office during the British period in Sri Lanka, often talked about the British rule of Ceylon. I could remember him sitting on an old chair greeting me with his soft voice and talking about political life in Sri Lanka. I remembered his distinctive and strong words about Ceylon's political life during British rule. He said that the Tamils and Sinhala leaders of both communities were active and collaborative participants during the British period in politics on a national and local scale, notably in the agitation for constitutional reform. According to Arthur, the first President of the Ceylon National Congress, formed in 1919, was Sir Ponambalam Arunachalam⁶⁰, a Tamil. However, with the introduction of territorial representation, Tamil political leaders like Sir Ponambalam Ramanathan and his brother Sir Ponambalam Arunachalam moved away from the mainstream of collaborative national coalition, even resigning from the Ceylon National Congress, which they had helped to found. Arthur would insist with his feeble voice that the present civil war in Sri Lanka was due to the territorial as against communal (ethnic) representation in Sri Lanka, and Tamils have lost the favoured and privileged position they enjoyed in the midst of the numerically predominant Sinhala population.

With all these thoughts in my mind I slowly walked towards the entrance while my eyes searched for Kumar, a relative of mine who was to meet me at the railway station. He came to London as a refugee in 1990 with his family. When I told him that I needed to stay in London for few days, he readily invited me to come and stay with his family.

I saw Kumar for the first time after six years of separation. A 34-year-old man in a black leather jacket with his wife Jessie, and two children came to receive me. Kumar did not look like a Tamil person from Sri Lanka; his appearance looked strange to me, but as soon as he started speaking in Tamil everything became familiar. Kumar told me that they lived in a council flat in Tooting. I did not understand the difference between

⁶⁰ See also Wickramasinghe, Nira, *Ethnic Politics in Colonial Sri Lanka 1927-1947*. Delhi: Vikas Publishing house Pvt. Ltd., 1995, p. 38.

Council flats and other flats until I met a substantial number of Tamil refugees who lived in Council flats in different areas of London. The journey from central London to their Tooting flat in their Toyota car took nearly one hour. While we were travelling Kumar asked me, "What do you think of London?" I did not respond because I did not know what to say. I smiled at him and looked outside through the car window. He said, "this is a bigger version of Colombo, isn't it?" I did not answer. He continued, "Look, look! Can you see a carrier bag flying on the air? We can see this sort of things in Colombo, can't we?" For me, London looked crowded with people from different nationalities, the roads were jammed with vehicles, and the surroundings were not clean. May be this is what Kumar was trying to tell me. I asked him what he meant when he said that London looked like the city of Colombo. He said that he did not mean the size of the city or the shape of the buildings; but for him the atmosphere felt like Colombo. I saw many high-rise modern buildings as well as Victorian red brick old buildings. While observing and talking about London, our conversation drifted to relatives and friends in Sri Lanka. Kumar and Jessie were keen to find out about the present political situation in Sri Lanka. Although I did not have any new information to convey, I shared my impressions of Sri Lanka and the civil war.

After a while Jessie pointed out a very tall building and said, "Can you see our house?" I looked through the car window and saw a high-rise building painted in white and blue. The building was exceptionally taller than all the buildings in that area. Jessie continued, "We live on the 14th floor." I was told that the Council gave this flat to them. The block of flats was situated in one corner of High Street junction. There was an extensive shopping complex on the ground floor of the building and adjacent areas.

We reached the building and got into the elevator. When the elevator doors closed I saw a line written in black thick felt pen, "Paki go home." I asked them "what does it mean?" Kumar said, "Dirty whites don't like us." I asked him why. They said that they did not know, but often see insult written on walls and lifts and deleted by the Council janitor who cleans the area. They also said that it was an intimidating experience at the beginning, but they had got used to it now. The areas surrounding the Council house and the inside of the elevator were dirty with garbage, and smelly. In a few seconds we reached the 14th floor and entered their house number 61. Everything on the ground, people, vehicles and even normal houses looked very small through their window. The flat was small, with two bedrooms of 8' x 10', a living room of 8' x 12', a kitchen, one toilet and a storage box room. Kumar and Jessie told me to use one of the bedrooms

during my stay there, usually occupied by the children; the children could sleep with them.

A few hours after our arrival, Kumar and Jessie asked me what was I going to do in London. I explained that my interest was meeting Sri Lankans who had come to London as refugees. Immediately Kumar said, "The easiest way to meet people is to organise a meal," and Jessie agreed. I was astounded when they took the lead in organising 'samples' for my information. My polite refusal was not accepted on this and on many other occasions, for they declared that, as I was their relative, they must help me achieve my goal. They told me that I did not need to worry about my research; their friends could give me all the information I needed. Organising a meal is primarily a social cultural event among Tamil people, which creates closeness and friendship, conditioned by the community setting. Kumar and Jessie planned the menu for the meal and invitations for a dinner were given by telephone. Although as a researcher I felt uneasy about their organising a gathering for my own good, Kumar and Jessie told me that their friends would be very happy to come to their house for a meal. I could have been the happiest person if a research could be done just like that, on a sofa. Although I could not see a common meal as part of my research, I went along with their plan, knowing that I would be able to meet some Tamils who had come to the UK as refugees.

The dining area in the house was too small to accommodate twelve adults (seven men, five women) and four children. So, Kumar decided to shift all the furniture in the living room to their bedroom to get everyone in. Their friends began to arrive one by one and sat on the living room floor. I was introduced to each guest as a relative from Sri Lanka who had come to study Tamil refugees. "Oh! You don't live here?" one guest exclaimed. His frank remark made me feel that a gap had been created between them and me. I sensed that the words "you don't live here" came with disappointment, frustration and suspicion, even a trace of anger, and set me apart from the entire group. In a way it was true. I can go back to Sri Lanka whenever I want, but they cannot. This was confirmed when another said, "So, you are here for your research and then you go back to Sri Lanka. Am I correct?" I nodded. All the guests appeared to look at me with intensity and I felt that I had become the 'subject' of their own searching eyes. I began to wonder what I was doing there. To help create an easy atmosphere, I greeted everyone and told them that I was simply interested in life of Tamil people in London. They looked at one another. No one spoke for several minutes until two male students started a conversation on the topic of Sri Lankan women in London:

Arul: (...) Most of the Indian women stay inside the house, but Sri Lankan Tamil women go to work even in Sri Lanka. So I do not think women find it difficult in London (...).

Sathish: I don't agree. There are many Sri Lankan women who do not go to work in London.

Arul: Ha! In Jaffna?⁶¹

Sathish: In Jaffna less than fifty percent of the women go to work.

Arul: Yet I do not think they are kept at home forcibly. If they found a proper job, they would grab it.

I was not sure about the intentions of this student who had chosen to speak about women in the first instance. Later Jessie told me that four of the five women present were working women. At one point one of the women told me that she would not work if she were in Sri Lanka. Two of the women told me they would prefer to stay at home, have children, and look forward to the husbands' return from work. The non-working woman said, "Staying at home would be the ideal consideration, the one we prefer as Tamil women."

The short conversations took place in relaxed, informal conditions, with casual laughing, shouting and singing. One man asked if I cared to know more about Tamils, and he began to sing a 'London Song':

Iyo! Iyo!
This is the London city, and
I lived in this country for a long, long time, yet
Didn't achieve anything'

They continued to clap, shout, and laugh for several hours. The twelve adults present were all aged between 20 and 40. By mid night, they left the house, one by one, as they had come. All of us were very tired and went to bed soon after.

The following day Kumar asked me whether I had collected material for my records. I looked at him, uncertain what to say, and replied that I had gathered some valuable information. To my dismay Kumar and Jessie offered to organise another meal for me and invite some more people. Before I had organised myself and got to know the city, I was given further pre-arranged groups from which to collect information - the last thing I

⁶¹ Jaffna and Batticaloa are the two main cities in the North and East of Sri Lanka, where the majority of Tamils in Sri Lanka live. The majority of the refugees who were interviewed in this study came from these areas.

wanted for my research. I explained that I wished to tour the city alone first to see Sri Lankan life in London. Kumar felt uneasy, because I did not ask him to show me around. He said he was willing to take me by car to visit all the Sri Lankan shops, temples, and to show me the Sri Lankan-London life. He was prepared to take a few days leave to do it, but I declined the offer as best as I could and made it clear that I needed to do it by myself.

I do not share these experiences for the reader's amusement, but hope to illustrate, through them, the community bonding and solidarity among Sri Lankan Tamil people; this hospitality is the life-blood of Tamil culture. Grossberg points this out by saying that cultural identification is revealed through belonging. Identification is not about places, "but more a matter of the spatial relations of places" and persons who live in them.⁶² Although my friend's family lived in London, they were uneasy that I did not accept their help because their minds and attitudes were Sri Lankan. They did not want to see me as an individual person, but as part of the Tamil community. Help came without any cost. My friends live in London and clearly I do not, therefore, my rejecting their help was not considered normal behaviour. I needed to convince them how important it was that I worked alone. We shall see this aspect of the Sri Lankan refugee community in London again later in the study. I have also observed that this feeling of blood solidarity in the Tamil community caused many Tamil refugees to be brutally torn between their personal life and the community bond - sacrificing their lives in London in order to keep their kith and kin happy in Sri Lanka.

My exploration of the refugee Tamil community in London began with the 'Tamil Directory' (*Thamil Ollaikal*⁶³). In my first visits to the Tamil ghettos of London I spent many hours wandering around, reliving the familiar in Sri Lanka and becoming familiar with the unfamiliar in London. I visited temples, grocery shops, restaurants, and the

⁶² Grossberg, L., "Identity and Cultural Studies: Is That All There is?" in Hall, S. & Gay, Paul du (ed.), *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: SAGE Publication, 1996, p. 101.

⁶³ The Tamil Directory (*Thamil Ollaikal*) is published annually in London; it gives all the information of Tamil activities in the UK. Rajah, T Srikantha and Gnanendran, A. (eds.), *Tamil Pages 1998*. London: British Tamil Directories, 1998. It is somewhat similar to the 'Yellow Pages'. Tamil Pages also available at: <http://tamilpages.luxmi.com>

many other enterprises run by Sri Lankan Tamils in London (Appendix I).⁶⁴ I could relish the smell of incense and of spices and spicy food that somebody was cooking in Sri Lankan ways. I could listen attentively to the sounds of Tamil music and conversations, delight in the sight of signs in shops and cinemas written in my familiar Tamil alphabet, and I could admire the slow, rhythmical swing of young bronze Tamil bodies. My memories of home came back to me and entered my inner being through the senses. I felt that Tamil refugees had tried to replicate, as far as possible, the pattern of life in their original villages; being far from home, I felt at home, but not quite at home: "Even Tamil food in London does not taste the same as in Sri Lanka, does it?" - my friend Kumar exclaimed. "No, it doesn't," I replied.

An old man complained to me: "Back in Sri Lanka I was a village leader, people respected me and my relatives even venerated me in my own house; but here they find me a nuisance." A middle-aged man complained that children and women here enjoy more freedom than is becoming to them. University students stated that they abandoned their Hindu religious practices as soon as they arrived in London, and that "Hinduism has lost its impact here." Soon I realised that the code of conduct has changed significantly, that young Tamils were adopting new sets of values and mores, and that even the most sacrosanct "blood solidarity" had lost its compelling force. The standard of living of the Tamils, I thought, no doubt has gone up, but the quality of their lives has declined. Jeya, a young woman, remarked:

Young people here have no *kalāccāram* (culture) and are mimicking the white man's *kalāccāram*.

I learnt that meeting my interviewees in unfamiliar locations was impractical and unnatural, so much so that they were unlikely to disclose information to me unless they felt at ease with the atmosphere of the interviews. In atmospheres unfamiliar to them I elicited only very superficial information and passing remarks about their life. Initially, I wondered whether my being a Tamil from Sri Lanka would make my research easier or more difficult than for someone who was not. My gut feeling had been that people

⁶⁴ By studying the Tamil directory (*Thamil Ollaikal*) I found that most listings originated from and within London. In particular, grocery shops which sell Sri Lankan spices, food stuffs and other consumable items - shops which needed a strong Sri Lankan community for their continuation - were situated in specific places in London. By visiting Sri Lankan grocery shops, I found that there is a strong presence of Sri Lankan Tamil community in each of these areas.

would volunteer stories and information about their lives, but in the event I found that an official approach with an introductory letter as a researcher from Edinburgh not only failed to produce results, but also alienated me from my interviewees. I speak the language of Tamils, I belong to the same ethnic group, and I come from the same country and specific area, but the Tamil refugees of London did not feel comfortable with me. There was something that distanced me from them. When I came to know some of the people in the later days of my field study, the interviewees explained that they did not share stories about their lives because they were unsure of my intentions. In particular, they thought I might be collecting information for immigration/ Home Office, which could jeopardise their asylum application in London. According to them, the Sri Lankan Tamils who came to the UK as professionals did not like refugee Tamils from Sri Lanka, because they cannot make a distinction between their 'castes'⁶⁵ in London. They wondered whether I was working closely with British authorities; I looked so 'professional' to them! Second, they said that some Sri Lankan Tamils laughed and looked down at refugee Tamils because they did not speak English.⁶⁶ However, these

⁶⁵ It should be noted that the caste system in Tamil Nadu, India, where 50 million Tamil speaking people live, and the caste system among Tamil speakers in Sri Lanka are slightly different. In India the *Brahmin* or Priestly caste forms the top of the hierarchy, while in Sri Lanka the *Brahmin* caste is accepted, but it is the caste of *Vellala* or cultivators (the *sudras* in India) that hold pre-eminence. Holmes observes that this is due to the high percentage of the cultivator's caste against a mere handful of Brahmins. "They compose the great majority of the 'respectable' people of the society, which means those who are educated and of a high or good caste." The cultivator's caste (*vellala*) owns more than 50% of the agricultural land. See Holmes, W Robert, *Jaffna (Sri Lanka) 1980*. Jaffna, Sri Lanka: The Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society of Jaffna College, 1980, pp. 20 & 205; Sivathamby noted that even the state administration was performed "in such a manner as not to upset the social hierarchy" of the Tamil society. See also Sivathamby, K., *Sri Lankan Tamil Society and Politics*. Madras: New Century Book House (P) Ltd., 1995, pp. 45-49; and Also see Sivarajah, A., "Jaffna Society's Political Leadership: Research on Family, Social and Economic Background." (Tamil) in Kanagaratnam et.al, *Prof. C Thilainathan Felicitation Issue*. Kandy, Sri Lanka: Felicitation Committee, 1997 and Banks, Michael, "Caste in Jaffna" in Leach, E. R., *Aspects of Caste in South India, Ceylon and North-West Pakistan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960 (reprinted 1962), pp. 66-7.

⁶⁶ Tamils who came to the UK before 1983 were mainly professionals and students of higher education. They were able to speak English or at least muddle through in order to assimilate in their host country. Refugee Tamils who mainly came from the Tamil villages in Sri Lanka found it extremely difficult to understand and communicate in English. Also see Daniel, E. V. & Thangaraj, Y., "Forms, Formations, and Transformations of the Tamil Refugee" in Daniel, E. V. & Knudsen, J. C., *Mistrusting Refugees*. Berkeley, USA: University of California Press, 1995.

random contacts helped me to observe general concepts of Tamil life in London, but I was not able to observe the process by which the refugee families establish a sense of continuity in their lives, that is, the relation between their past 'back home,' their present 'out here,' and their uncertain future 'only God knows where.' I wanted to establish more intimate contacts with my interviewees in an attempt to understand the process of their selective adaptations in London, and not merely accommodate the new socio-economic and cultural context to re-negotiate their identity definition.

1.6 TAMIL REFUGEES

My personal experience of working for six years among internally displaced people in Sri Lanka, has led me to study the human context of refugees. I lived in the Northern part of Sri Lanka from childhood. Later I lived in the same area as a Methodist minister from 1988 to 1994. I lived there throughout almost the whole period since the armed struggle broke out between the government troops and the Tamil militants. Men and women, young and old, started leaving the traditional inhabited areas for different parts of Sri Lanka, and for other parts of the world as 'refugees'. Furthermore, my immediate family was affected by the war. All my brothers and sisters are refugees: two brothers are in Switzerland, one sister is in Norway, and another sister is an internally displaced refugee in Sri Lanka. Naturally then, from this experience, when I came to Britain the focus of my attention was on the plight of the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees who have claimed asylum in huge numbers in several western countries.

I contacted organisations working among the Tamil refugees in London, yet I was told that it is not easy to get information about them, because they have a mandate to protect their identity. They said that they could help me only by writing letters to the refugees with the request to meet me, and only then, if they were willing to talk, we could meet. My short interactions with Tamil refugees, as I have mentioned above, showed me that this would not produce any useful results. Sri Lankan Tamil relationships worked better through personal contacts than through official interactions. During this period of my field research and in subsequent months I realised the truth of this more and more. My field experience was like a tug-a-war between the mandatory scientific detachment and objectivity on the one hand and my deeply felt sympathy on the other. The more I detached myself as a researcher and presented myself in an official capacity, the more I realised that Tamil refugees, too, became formal and evasive in their answers. I could almost see that they put a mask of respectability on their faces when they met me in an official capacity. Tournier explains the dilemma:

There are then two routes to be followed in the knowledge of man: one is objective and scientific, the other is subjective and intuitive. They cannot be equated together, for they require the exercise of utterly different faculties. One proceeds by logical analysis and precise assessment; the other by total understanding. One is an endless progression; the other is a sudden and complete discovery. (...) The two roads cross, however. Objective exploration prepares the way for the personal encounter. (...) Conversely, the personal encounter opens the road for more penetrating objective observation.⁶⁷

I observed the refugees caught up in a state of helplessness without appropriate support systems. Resources that they would have relied upon in their homeland are not found in the UK, and the existing resources available to them here appeared alien to them. I have realised that for many Tamil refugees the adaptation process had become painful. They were forced to move from the 'extended family' mode of existence to the nuclear family: from group existence to individual existence. The differences of language and life style had complicated the process of adjustment. Although refugee families experience difficulties that are common to many ordinary British families, they face unique psychological, environmental, and economic stresses such as tough immigration laws, and media and public opinion, all of which portray refugees as a 'problem' in Britain for the British population. They are forced to move through the accommodative path carrying emotional distress, symptoms of tension, and *anomie* of the self.

1.7 RELIGIOUS CONVERSION

The subject of religious conversion among Tamil refugees emerged after my 'field study' in London. Ten days had passed since I began my field study. It was Sunday and Kumar and Jessie invited me join them to their Tamil Pentecostal Church in Greenford. I readily accepted, thinking it would be a good opportunity to meet people. While we were on our way to Greenford by car, I asked them about their church. Jessie said:

It is a church for Sri Lankan people and the pastor is also a Sri Lankan. You may be able to find several other churches similar to the one we are travelling to around London.

This was news to me. Up to now I had only learnt of one Sri Lankan Tamil congregation that met for worship in a Methodist Church. I gleaned more information from my

⁶⁷ Tournier, Paul, *The Meaning of Persons*. NY: Harper & Row Publications, 1957, p. 25.

companions as we travelled, and they shared some details that gave me new insights and a new perspective; my exhilaration was so intense that I knew that my work had, in fact, now begun.

The Tamil Church at Greenford rented the parish hall of the Baptist Church for their Sunday worship services and other activities.⁶⁸ The Church hall is upstairs and to the rear of the church two other rooms are also used. The hall is used for worship and the two rooms are for Sunday school for children and socialising after the service. I was told and later observed that an individual or a family brings either snacks or meals for the entire congregation every Sunday. The church members often referred the congregation as their family and used Church rooms for family celebrations.⁶⁹ Church members brought meals to celebrate birthdays, wedding anniversaries, coming-of-age ceremonies, birth of children, and so on. The meals prolonged the stay of the church members for one or two hours after the service, for interaction and discussion.

The day I went to this church for the first time there were between fifty and sixty people present in the congregation. All the members, except the pastor (who was invited from Sri Lanka), and a few others, are Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka. The first time I saw a group of Tamil converts in considerable numbers in this Church, I felt I should get to know more about them.

The service started at 10.00 a.m. with singing and clapping of hands, with loud cries of 'Hallelujah' and 'Praise the lord', which they called 'praise time.' The service continued with 'prayer time' to pray for various needs, and 'testimony time,' when members got up and shared what God had done for them during the past week. The service went on till 1.00 p.m. They then all gathered in the next room, for a family had brought food for all of them to celebrate their daughter's birthday. In a relaxed atmosphere they talked about

⁶⁸ The general pattern of Church services is similar in all the Tamil Churches, but the administrative structure of each church varies. All the Tamil Pentecostal churches situated in these areas had rented out Church halls of different denominations.

⁶⁹ During July - September 1997, the researcher observed several birthday celebrations, two wedding anniversaries and two puberty ceremonies, all held in the church. Every ceremony had religious connotations, and ended with meals provided by the family or individuals connected to the function. If the person concerned is an individual who had left his/ her family back in Sri Lanka, other church members or families provided eatables or meals. All the other Tamil Pentecostal churches in London visited by the researcher functioned similarly.

their problems with immigration, in the work place, about income support, and many other issues of concern which I never dreamed of hearing in one single day.

The Tamil churches began converting people to Christianity when Samuel an English man, saw a number of Sri Lankans, Christians and Hindus, living in the Harrow area. With the help of a Sri Lankan, he founded a Pentecostal type of Church, in Wealdstone. Samuel became fascinated by the fast growth of his new church and encouraged young Tamil men to accept God's call and become pastors to work among Sri Lankan Tamils. They also started another branch in Wood Green. Samuel also met the Superintendent of the Church of God Church in the UK⁷⁰, and explained the potential of work among Sri Lankan Tamils in London. The Church of God Church in the UK became interested and started systematic work among the Sri Lankan Tamils in London. Although several new churches functioned under the extensive umbrella of the Church of God Church in the UK, they do not have any unified doctrinal or administrative policies, other than general guidelines. So, every community functions on its own, with the leadership of a pastor and leaders appointed by the pastor, but carrying the banner of the Church of God. The Church of God continues to educate the pastors, teaching them their aims and objectives, but at the moment they do not impose any prescribed administrative procedures.

Apart from these, there are many independent churches working among Tamils; few of them funded by Sri Lankan Tamil churches in Denmark, France and Germany. At the time of completing my proposal in January 1997, there were nineteen churches working among Tamils in London; but when the field research was completed in September 1997 there were twenty-two congregations in London (Appendix I). Among these twenty-two Sri Lankan Tamil congregations in London, one finds that each congregation has its unique way of ministry and of worship patterns. The process is steady and the flow of Tamils attending Christian churches in London is increasing.

⁷⁰ The Church of God Church officially convened its first assembly in North Carolina, USA, and appointed Tomlinson as its moderator. It is said, "the Church of God is America's first Pentecostal denomination." They focus on a particular theme every two years. "The theme for the period 1990-92 was *"BEHOLD THE HARVEST"* (John 4:35); for 1992-94, it was *"LABOURERS FOR THE HARVEST"*; for 1994-96, *"REAPING THE HARVEST"*; for 1996-98, *"CARING FOR THE HARVEST"* and for 1998-2000, *"THE SPIRIT OF THE HARVEST"*. In Hess, Larry G., *A Summary of the History of the Church of God 1886 to 1992*, pp. HS-2, HS-9 & HS-10.

My familiarity with the Greenford Tamil Church made me to go there; my host family in Tooting gave me all their support, thinking that they were going to win a new soul to the church; specifically, they thought that they were going to make me a born-again minister. I could do that only if I agreed to renounce infant baptism and receive baptism by immersion in the church. I understood the pressure from the beginning, but I barely had any time to consider anything other than attending the church services and meeting people for my study. One day in January 1997, after the usual singing and praise time that lasted an hour, the pastor invited people to share their testimony. A few people got up and shared what God had done for them during the past week. After a while a man called Chandran got up, paused, and shared his conversion experience. His experiences would be discussed in other chapters; his testimony at the moment went on like this:

My new experience has made me question several of my earlier ideas. God wanted me to quit the movement (he was a member of a Tamil militant movement operating in the UK). I want to obey God's voice, and now I am waiting to see what He has planned for me. I am not saying that I have become a Christian, therefore I have lost my interest in social change. (...) Now I have started praying for certain things, I feel God has answered all my prayers immediately. It is a wonderful experience (...) now I feel I am dealing with 'The God'.

A member of a militant movement who had come to London to organise the struggle for a separate homeland for Tamils in Sri Lanka was now telling everyone that he was leaving the movement because God wanted him to leave it and join an alternative religious community. He was my first interviewee, who later gave me much stimulating thought and guided me to understand the strongest point in the religious conversion among Sri Lankan Tamils in London.

In the next few days I met several pastors based at other Tamil churches to discover that some churches have a membership between 30 to 350 people in one single church. The following questions came to mind:

1. Why do Tamil refugees change their religion in London?
2. Is there any connection between their refugee experience and their religious change?
3. Has this religious change aided them to achieve positive results in their lives?

I returned to Edinburgh, presented the proposal, met with the 'faculty board', and narrowed my proposal to the specific subject of religious conversion among Sri Lankan Tamils in London.

1.8 INTERVIEWS

The selection of my samples and methodology needs some explanation here. This research is a combination of two disciplines - theology and social sciences. It is empirical in nature, theological in intention; and the ethnographic method was used to collect information and interviews.

The Tamils who came after the 1983 ethnic riots became my target group because they mainly constitute the congregations in the new Tamil churches. After religious conversion became the subject of study, I strengthened my contacts with the Tamil churches in London. Soon I attended a monthly Sri Lankan pastors' fellowship and explained to the pastors of different churches that I needed to meet some of their members for interviews. Some of them accepted and welcomed me to their churches, but others did not feel at ease. The pastors who were reluctant to accede told me that they had a responsibility towards their members and I could talk to them only in the presence of one of their leaders. I was made to understand that they did not want their members to become confused after prolonged conversations on conversion, because my church affiliation was different from theirs. I talked to people in the presence of a church leader and found out that these interview situations became very formal and did not help me to understand anything in depth or in detail. So, I selected my interviewees from the churches that had agreed to let their members meet me in my own way and pace, in the places chosen by the interviewees themselves, usually their own homes.

In the first instance, I would go to a church and the pastor would introduce me to the congregation and tell them that I had come to talk with them about their religious conversion and life in London. Then I met people and talked with them. Some of my interviewees knew that I was a Methodist minister, not because I told them, but because their pastors had introduced me as such. I took the utmost care never to discuss religious or theological points of view, but kept my opinions and persuasions to myself; when sometimes my interviewees asked me "what do you think?" I evaded a direct answer by pointing to some interesting shades in the interviewee's statements. Later I was invited to pray and preach, and I accepted; but no perceptible change has come as a result of my long months of intensive study and the several less prolonged visits I made to the different churches.

In the process of interviewing them, I have found that some people could not articulate freely, and the tentative interviews were laborious, with little significant result in my opinion. The selection process continued for some time, with the trial and error method. By July 1997 all the samples were defined and from then onwards my interviews continued as planned. My interviewees come from three areas in London and they are between the ages 23 to 54. Although I met a number of them in short encounters, the in-depth interviews were conducted among twenty-one people; sixteen men and five women. The male/female ratio does not reflect a corresponding proportion of membership to the churches; it is only an indication of the difficulty of a stranger to talk with a woman alone, in the absence of her husband or immediate relatives.

The interviews were conducted in a relaxed atmosphere. With their permission I recorded our conversations on tapes but in some instances, when informing me about some delicate matter, the interviewees suggested I should switch off the tape recorder, and I did. However, after the first few minutes of conversation, the interviewees forgot the tape recorder and spoke frankly and spontaneously. As the conversation proceeded, my interviewees became more and more explicit and intense in their narratives and, at times, 'confessions'. All the interviews were conducted in Tamil, the vernacular language of the interviewees and the interviewer. The use of Tamil proverbs and local slang helped loose any tension. Often in the conversations the interviewees used the expression "if you understand what I mean." All of them wanted to be heard and even more to be understood by the other. My interviews had no therapeutic intention whatsoever, but at times I felt that I am a Tamil too, and also affected by the present war; so I was not a cold, unaffected observer, but a participant in a dialogue; it was no longer a question of their speaking and I of recording their speech; it was an attempt to communicate and understand each other.

I interviewed many people informally, sometimes individually, other times in-groups. When I attempted in-depth interviews with women, often the only response I could obtain were shy smiles. It is not common for Tamil women, especially Hindu women, to talk with men other than family members. In some of the most dramatic cases, the interviewees expressed their desire to establish a counselling relationship with me; I had to decline, and explained that such a relationship would defeat the purpose of my plan and vitiate my inquiry. Yet, I participated actively and effectively in their religious services, conversion testimonies, wedding anniversaries, baptism and get-togethers in general. On those occasions I set aside camera, tape recorder, notebook and pen and immersed myself in the life of the community, sharing their joys and their hopes.

Before we go into that subject I would like to take the reader, so to speak, for a guided tour through the Tamil ghettos in London, to perceive the general life pattern of refugees in London, in order to help the reader to understand the following chapters.

1.9 TAMIL LIFE IN LONDON

The first notable observation I made was that, by and large, Sri Lankan Tamil families in London have settled down among Indian communities. Those Tamil refugees who came with their families were accommodated in Council houses in different boroughs. In most cases they still remain where they were given accommodation. Then when they are ready to buy a house of their own and move, they receive financial assistance from their respective Councils. These families buy a house where there is either a large Indian or Sri Lankan population. Jeya, Ganesh, Krishna and Chandran bought houses between 1997 – 1998. Jeya and Ganesh bought houses in Southall where there is a strong Indian community. Krishna and Chandran bought houses in Alperton where there is an Indian and Sri Lankan community. If Tamil refugees are given the option of choosing their place of residence, they prefer to settle down among Indian or Sri Lankan communities. For example Ganesh, having lived in an English-speaking neighbourhood for several years, bought a house in Southall.

Another reason given by Tamil refugees for settling down among Indian communities was employment. This conversation between Kumar (a pastor working among Sri Lankan people) and Jeya, his fiancée, explained the context very clearly:

Jeya: Another reason for Sri Lankans to come and settle down among Indians was that there were more job opportunities available to Sri Lankans among the Indian population.

Kumar: Indians prefer to employ Sri Lankans and Indians, because they cannot control of white labour force like a Sri Lankan or an Indian labour force.

Jeya: Many Sri Lankans have no social security number, because they receive state benefits. If an employer is white, then he will ask for all the documents and the employer will have to pay proper wages and all the other benefits. But Sri Lankans would be happy to work for a lower salary and for 'cash in hand'.

Kumar: Sri Lankans cannot get employment from white British person. But an Indian would say, even if you don't have the 'number,' don't worry, I'll pay you 'cash in hand'. I know a boy doing a difficult job just for £ 2 per hour (...)

Nine out of twenty one interviewees are working in Indian establishments.

1.9.1 CHANGING FAMILY PATTERNS

My encounters with refugee Tamils show that there are changes going on in the traditional distribution of family roles in Sri Lankan Tamil families living in London. My meetings with them made me realise that they have had the painful experience that certain functions of woman, man, children and parental relationships and responsibilities, once considered as proper among Tamil families, were questioned in their new life in London. For example, in Sri Lanka the husband is usually the only breadwinner of the family. Many women believed that staying at home and fulfilling the duties and chores of a housewife is the proper norm for Tamil women.⁷¹ However, in London both husband and wife feel compelled to work outside the house in order to satisfy the growing economic needs of the family, and this has profoundly affected the traditional role of the partners, and so the family relationships are felt to be somehow unbalanced. Ratnam, an interviewee and a solicitor, told me that the divorce rate had increased among Sri Lankan Tamil families. I asked him why? He said:

In Sri Lanka we lived in communities. When there was a family crisis, there were lots of people who would intervene and help the family, but now there is no one available. Women in London see that they can survive on their own without the help of a man. Even if you leave your husband, the government will provide help to the wife to bring up the children. So, if there is even a small problem, the tendency is to divorce the husband.

On the other hand, Jeya, who is in her twenties, looked at the issue from another angle and said that the traditional Sri Lankan family system is not practical in London:

In our system, daughters-in-law are expected to respect their in-laws. Very often the parents of the boy expect their daughter-in-law to be under their jurisdiction, but the children who are brought up in this culture cannot accept that. If they think that they are the equals of their husbands, how can they accept the authority of their in-laws?

Another issue was raised by Ratnam the solicitor about Tamil children in London. According to him:

⁷¹ As quoted in p. 29, "Staying at home would be our ideal consideration we prefer as Tamil women."

Parents want to bring up their children as children in Sri Lanka; but the children have found new bonds of solidarity based on friendship in their new found English-based peer group.

Education has been regarded as the most important activity for the young Tamils throughout their long history in Sri Lanka. They know they can engage in white-collar work, rather than the traditional activity of farming only, via the route of education. Under the British rule of Sri Lanka, “important positions in the public services and the armed forces were held by (...) Ceylon Tamils,”⁷² due to their special education and training. This is still vivid and fresh in the memory of Sri Lankan Tamils today. Now that they have fresh opportunities, they encourage and to some extent force their children to study hard against all odds, to compete with British children. Ganesh said:

Asians study for practical reasons. They have to study to survive (...). An English boy doesn't have to survive in his own country, he can just live. He is safe and secure, but Asians are not safe and secure in their own neighbourhood (...).

The researcher observed worried parents and agitated children among refugee Tamils in London. Within some refugee Tamil families, the generation gap has created conflicts. Sri Lankan children in London feel that their parents are curtailing their freedom. Ratnam was terrified when his children questioned Sri Lankan Tamil parental responsibility:

I am worried about my children. I have two children, a girl of 12 years and a boy of 7 years. (...) I was walking with my daughter to a birthday party several years ago. She was 8 or 9 years old then. She said, “Daddy, when I reach 18, can I go and live with a friend in a flat?” I was shocked. Last year my wife went to smack my son and he said, “Mum, you can't smack me”. She asked “why?” He said, “my teacher told me”.

To heal this growing breach, government and charitable institutions have established counselling services to help families handle their problems; but these services are mostly available only in English, and their professional staff imply that their English values and education is the standard applicable to all. Therefore, those refugees who are not conversant enough in English cannot benefit from these services. Furthermore, refugees

⁷² Wilson, A. J., *Politics in Sri Lanka 1947 - 1973*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1974, p. 20.

complained to me that the methods used for counselling are based on 'Western' theory and practice, and so their 'correctional' methods of counselling for dysfunctional families are based on the ideals of the 'Western family system.' I did not understand the concept of 'Western family system' that was presented as in opposition to 'Sri Lankan family system' by refugee Tamils. So, when I met Kala, who went through difficulties in her family life, I asked her to explain this phenomenon. She stated:

Several people advised me to see a professional counsellor to help me face my problems constructively, but I found that the counselling service complicated my problems more and more. The counsellors tried to explain my rights, and suggested that the easiest way to solve a problem was to destroy the problem by cutting it by the roots. They even directed me towards divorce. As a Sri Lankan woman, I am not interested in divorce. In Sri Lanka, we don't divorce like British women do in London. If I divorce, who will marry my daughters when they reach their marriageable age?⁷³

Moreover, after confronting some similar situations I realised that it would be very difficult for a refugee to receive counselling and guidance from British people for as long as the refugees see the counsellor as 'different' from themselves.

1.9.2 MONEY MAKING

When Swarnan, an interviewee, decided to leave Sri Lanka as a refugee, he borrowed 550,000 rupees (£5,500.00) from his relatives, and friends to pay the fraudulent travel agent who arranged the trip for him. Sinathurai, Jothi, Jeya, Saro and several other interviewees did the same thing. Families and relatives with the greatest sacrifices select and sponsor a person to travel to the UK, and then expect him or her to make the largest sums of money in the shortest time possible. My interviewees were caught up in a traumatic situation where they had to earn as much as possible in the shortest time because many of them did not know what would happen to their asylum application in the UK. Again, interviewees like Swarnan, Sinathurai, Vimalan and others came from

⁷³ Divorce is not considered an acceptable social expedient in Sri Lankan context. In a context where marriages are arranged for their children by parents, divorce would reflect negatively on children. When Kala said "who will marry my daughters when they reach their marriageable age?" she means that her daughters would not be considered as suitable marriage partners by other parents. Although this concept is continuously challenged by social thinkers in Sri Lanka, it is still the norm in most Tamil villages in Sri Lanka.

fairly poor Sri Lankan families. Swarnan earned a monthly salary of 2,700 rupees (£27.00), which is barely enough to survive in Sri Lanka. Sinathurai, Vimalan and several others earned similar wages, just the minimum demanded by law. According to them, their family solidarity and kinship helped them to borrow huge sums of money to pay their travel agents. Of course they are expected to repay these sums, but they would also continue their remittance indefinitely, after repaying their debts, to support their kith and kin in Sri Lanka. The “remittance economy”⁷⁴ is also very important among London Tamils, because they continue supporting their family members to enable them to survive during the war in their motherland. The remittance is not just a repayment of debt, but a duty of solidarity based on blood; often this money is used to help other members flee the war torn villages. Sathivel, Suriya, Sinathurai and Hanna received money from their relatives abroad to arrange their journey. In several cases their whole life in London had been reduced to the task of money making. I will discuss this more closely later in my study, but to give the reader an idea at this point, I will illustrate it with an example: Swarnan was an office assistant in Sri Lanka, who came to London in 1994 and who now lives in Southall. His wife and three daughters are in Sri Lanka. He stated that he has the following responsibilities:

1. Money borrowed to pay the ‘travel agent’⁷⁵ - Rs. 550,000.00 (£5,500.00 pounds).
2. Money borrowed for his travel expenses – Rs. 100,000.00 (£1,000.00).
3. Make *thali*⁷⁶ for his wife and jewellery for his daughters.

⁷⁴ A term used in Sri Lanka to describe the economy based on the export of labour to the Middle East and the remittance of foreign currency to support their families back home.

⁷⁵ The word ‘travel agents’ among Sri Lankan refugees does not mean, travel centres or sub agents for different airlines. ‘Travel agent’ means a person or group of persons who organise illegitimate ways to get across refugees from Sri Lanka to other countries. There is no fixed fee for this service. The amount of money varies from ‘travel agent’ to ‘travel agent’. Some interviewees have paid from 400,000 rupees (£4,000.00) to 800,000 rupees (£8,000.00) each to reach the UK. Strict and tightened immigration control in asylum providing countries have increased the fee enormously. A refugee who reached the UK in September 1998 told the researcher that he has paid 1200,000 rupees (£12,000.00) to his ‘travel agent’. For further clarification on ‘travel agents’ consult, *Sri Lanka: Alien Smuggling (Question and Answer Series)*. Ottawa, Canada: The Research Directorate, Documentation, Information and Research Branch, Immigration and Refugee Board, May 1996.

4. Pay capital investment for his brother to start a grocery shop.
5. Continuously support his eldest sister's family. Her husband was sick.
6. Help his second sister to pay their mother's medical expenses. Their mother is a cancer patient.
7. Find dowry for his sister's three daughters. The eldest daughter is 25 years old now (Rs. 300,000.00 [£3,000.00] per daughter).
8. Save money to pay a travel agent to bring his wife and three children to Britain (Each person needs £7,000.00)⁷⁷.

This seems an unattainable goal for an individual alone, but Swarnan told me that between August 1994 and August 1997 he had completed tasks 1-4, whilst he was attempting and carrying out tasks 5 and 6. Tasks 7 & 8 are not yet attempted. In order to achieve this, he has been working seventeen to eighteen hours a day from the day he landed in the UK. Many Sri Lankan Tamils are doing temporary or occasional odd jobs such as cleaners, cashiers in supermarkets and petrol stations, workers in the fast food industry, sales persons, and so on. Some have established their own businesses, mostly grocery shops, Tamil video rental shops, and catering services specifically for Sri Lankans, so that their customers may recollect and relish the spicy taste of food from their homeland.

1.9.3 NO RELIGION – NO RACE

The transition from traditional village Hinduism to their settlement in a metropolitan environment has caused deep cultural shifts among refugee Tamils. Sri Lankan Tamils

⁷⁶ The custom of *thali* derives from the Hindu religious tradition, but now has become part of Tamil custom, and common among Christians as well. *Thali*, according to the Hindu custom, is a piece of saffron tied in a string dyed in saffron water. *Thali* symbolises that the woman is protected by her man. But, *thali* is made with gold in our modern days and it is the duty of the husband to provide one. On the day of the wedding, the male partner ties a gold chain (*Thali*) with a pendant (which has religious symbols) around the neck of the bride. The number of sovereigns used illustrates the wealth of the man. See also Sanmugadas, A & Sanmugadas, M (eds.), *Marriage Customs of the Tamils* (Tamil) Jaffna, Sri Lanka: Muttamil Veliyiddu Kalagam, 1984, pp. 129-34.

⁷⁷ Swarnan's calculation of payment to 'travel agent' to arrange a trip to an individual from Sri Lanka to the UK was based on July 1997 figures.

have come from the Saivaite⁷⁸ (*Saiva*) tradition of Hinduism. The Hindu temples built by the Indian communities⁷⁹ in London do not derive from the same tradition and so provided an alternative. So, Tamils in London built temples, or bought properties and converted them into temples. Tamils have also absorbed the attractiveness and commercial aspects of the majority celebrations such as Christmas, New Year, and other calendar festivities of the Christian West. Hindu annual temple festivals are celebrated on a large scale, but have had to be adapted to the new living conditions, so they are now modified. A quarterly Saivaite magazine *Kalasam* is published for the Sri Lankan community in London. Yet, there is a constant feeling that some crucial traditional religious aspects of the community are being lost in London:

The basic symbol of a race is its language and religion. A community that preserves this would receive other blessings as well. The standards of the Tamil community have gone down because it has not preserved the language nor observed religious rituals (...). I need to emphasise that for refugees losing their religion and language is the equivalent to losing their race.⁸⁰

The Hindu temple is a place where the worshippers feel the presence of their deity. Men are supposed to enter the temple with a bare breast and barefoot (the symbol of supplication and submission to the deity), but in London they are inhibited for mere reasons of weather. Even wearing holy ashes on their forearm and face and breast is considered indecent, unsocial and bizarre by some white British; the wearing of the *poṭṭu* (a mark on their forehead, symbol of the Eye of *Siva*) by women has disappeared from day to day social life and is used only on festive occasions. The significance of these symbols, however, remains alive and important for London Tamils in preserving their cultural identity.

⁷⁸ Sri Lankan Tamils worship the Hindu deity *Siva* and thereby called themselves Saivites (*caivar*). Taylor observed that the Sri Lankan Tamils brought with them their own form of Hinduism. See Taylor, Donald, "Incipient Fundamentalism: Religion and politics among Sri Lankan Hindus in Britain" in Caplain, Lionel (ed), *Studies in Religious Fundamentalism*. London: Macmillan, 1987, p. 151.

⁷⁹ Richard Burghart's study among Indian communities in the UK shows that the first Hindu temple was consecrated in the UK (Leicester) in 1969. Burghart, Richard, "Introduction: The Diffusion of Hinduism to Great Britain" in Burghart, Richard (ed.), *Hinduism in Great Britain*. London & New York: Tevistock Publications, 1987, p. 8.

⁸⁰ Nithiyananthan, Ratnam (Dr), "Future Generation and Worship Patterns" (Tamil) in *Kalasam*, Vol.5, #23, July-August 1998.

1.9.4 A FAR CRY FROM LONDON

Many Sri Lankan refugees in London organise political rallies and publish pamphlets attacking the policies of the Sri Lankan government. The researcher observed a political demonstration organised by the refugee Tamils on 26 July 1997 as a remembrance of the 14th anniversary of ethnic violence in 1983, the 'Black July,' which initiated the mass exodus of Tamils to Western countries. The demonstration started at Temple Place (WC2) and went up to Hyde Park (W2). The demonstrators held placards and posters proclaiming:

Tamils in Sri Lanka were ruthlessly hunted down and slaughtered in their thousands by agents of the government, who sought Tamil residents with voters lists; Tamil property was looted and destroyed, and whole families of Tamils were burnt in their cars by Buddhist Sinhalese; 67 Tamil political prisoners, within the high security Welikada jail were slaughtered by Sinhala convicts in the same jail, while the prison officials looked on.

The demonstrators also carried slogans about the current situation in Sri Lanka. The slogans condemned the Sri Lankan government:

The current genocide conducted by the Sri Lankan government against the Tamil nation has led to the displacement of tens of thousands of Tamil men, women, children and babies in arms, who have fled the towns and cities and are languishing in the jungles of the Vanni, without food, shelter or medicines, under the blazing sun or in torrential rain. The massive human rights violations are blatant in the cities and towns of the Tamil Nation.

The researcher was told that this was an annual event.

There was another annual event staged by the refugee Tamils that aroused further friction between professional and refugee Tamils. The magnificent annual gathering among Sri Lankans was a cricket match in the UK among past students of several Sri Lankan schools. This match was played annually for several years until 1996, when Tamil refugees felt that they did not want to play cricket with Sinhala schools. A group of Tamil refugees informed the Tamil student associations of their dissatisfaction about Tamil schools playing cricket with Sinhala schools. They said that the Sri Lankan government had used the show of the annual cricket match as an example to the politicians in the UK that there was no crisis between the Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. They also said that the Sri Lankan government was trying to portray the problems in Sri Lanka as caused by a small group of terrorists, and that Tamils in London were not political refugees but economic refugees. The Tamil refugees

suggested that the cricket match of Tamil schools was organised for the first time in London as a propaganda event established by them in the attempt to disprove any bad relations between Tamils and Sinhalese. Past students associations of Sinhala schools were angered at this act and organised a cricket match among Sinhala schools on the same day in another venue. Many professional Tamils boycotted the Tamil cricket match, saying that the refugee Tamils have brought local politics to the UK. Some of them attended the Sinhala cricket match to show their solidarity as Sri Lankans. Henceforth, separate Tamil and Sinhala cricket matches have become annual features.

Tamils who settled in London before the 1980s are interested in the politics of the UK, but refugee Tamils who arrived after 1980's, seem to be exclusively interested in Sri Lankan politics. With regard to Western politics, they are not concerned about who rules Britain, but only about who supports the cause of the Tamils in Sri Lanka. I observed a strained situation between professional and refugee Tamils throughout my field work period in London. Professional Tamils looked at refugee Tamils as 'them', the same way refugee Tamils looked at British people as 'them'. My encounters with professional Tamils gave me the impression that they consistently avoided being associated with the refugee Tamils.⁸¹ When professional Tamils left Sri Lanka, there were many Sinhala professionals who followed them. Professional Sri Lankan Tamils and Sinhalese avoided talking about 'ethnic issues' that were hotly debated in Sri Lanka, thinking that local politics could harm their social gatherings as Sri Lankans. However, when Sri Lankan Tamils left as fugitives and arrived at Great Britain as refugees during the peak of the war, they brought with them hatred against the government and against the Sinhala people. Many professional Tamils do not like this.⁸²

⁸¹ Also see Daniel, E. V. & Thangaraj, Y., "Forms, Formations, and Transformations of the Tamil Refugee" in Daniel, E. V. & Knudsen, J. C., *Mistrusting Refugees*. Berkeley, USA: University of California Press, 1995, pp. 243-44.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 246.

The Tamil militants⁸³ keep their propaganda alive among the exiles. They have created, and are strengthening, a solidarity network among all the scattered Tamil communities not only in London and the United Kingdom, but also in the other European countries and beyond in Canada and Australia.

1.9.5 ENTERTAINMENT

There is a number of weekly papers and magazines available in Tamil. Some are published in the UK, and others are published in other European countries where Tamil refugees live. These publications in London and other countries reflect all important news from Sri Lanka, which allows refugees to follow and ultimately discuss the fluctuations of the war in Sri Lanka. There is also one radio station, founded in 1997, called 'International Broadcasting Corporation' (IBC), which is managed by Sri Lankan Tamils, and operates 24 hours via satellite. Sri Lankans also rent out one hour daily at 10.00 p.m. radio time from Sun Rise Radio, which is operated by Indians in London. This programme broadcasts Tamil entertainment and news to Sri Lankans in Medium Wave (MW). Tamil groups regularly import Tamil movies from south India and screen them in London theatres. South Indian cinema stars and singers are also invited to perform in different locations in London. They also organise closed-door festivals such as Sri Lankan song competitions, cinema song concerts, and cultural shows. This keeps them in touch with their cultural identity.

1.10 CONCLUSION

This will not be a complete account if I do not share my personal experience during my fieldwork period in London. My interviews which began between two strangers became a dialogue between two persons, and the dialogical encounter opened the way to see my initial interpretations in a new light, "and new interpretations, of both old and new data,

⁸³ In the middle 1970s educated Tamil youths had become more and more impatient with their moderate Tamil political leaders in Sri Lanka. They felt that the Tamil leaders always compromised with the Sinhalese government which did not produce any favourable outcomes for the Tamils. They started asking for a separate state for Tamils called '*Tamil Eelam*'. The Tamil leaders tried to carry the young along with them in their struggle, but gradually various sections of young people broke away and now there are many militant movements asking and fighting for a separate state. The biggest among these is 'Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.'

begin to emerge quite naturally.”⁸⁴ I make my own the words of Paul Tournier, a humanist Christian psychotherapist, who wrote:

(...) I passed from information to communion. Information is intellectual, whereas communion is spiritual; but information was the path that led to communion. Information speaks of personages. Through information we can understand a case; only through communion shall I be able to understand a person. Men expect of us that we should understand them as cases; but they also want to be understood as persons.⁸⁵

By the end of my stay among Tamil refugees I felt again that I was a Tamil among my own people, and the refugees considered me as one of them. And then I felt the painful necessity of leaving London in order to write about ‘them’ as if they were strangers to me. I was invited and visited them again and again for short visits to celebrate weddings and anniversaries, their housewarmings and puberty celebrations. These evocative and loving words by a British ethnologist, Colin M. Turnbull, after living with the Pygmies in Congo, could be my own after living among my own people in London:

Living so closely it was impossible not to begin to see the world as they saw it; sharing their pleasures and sorrows made it impossible not to feel as they did; and just being with a people so filled with the love of the forest made it impossible not to love as they did. The more I wanted to stay with them, and them alone, the more I knew it was time to move.⁸⁶

One of the most painful experiences was to alter the names of persons and places and villages, so as to preserve the promised confidentiality. Each one has a face, and behind that face is a lovely name, and behind the name there is a family, and behind the family there is a history of hope and despair, of rage and joy. I had similar feelings in my vacation visits to Norway, Switzerland and Toronto: I met uprooted Tamils among uprooted populations. There also I heard stories of the original placidity of their villages, the destruction of their habitat and dispersion of relatives and friends, the exodus to a foreign land, stories of struggle and horror and rage, of hope and despair.

⁸⁴ Spindler, George & Louise, Forward to Turnbull, Colin M., *The Mbuti Pygmies: Change and Adaptation*. Florida: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1983, p. iv.

⁸⁵ Tournier, Paul, *The Meaning of Persons*. *op.cit.* p. 25.

⁸⁶ Turnbull, Colin M., *The Forest People – A Study of the Pygmies of the Congo*. New York: The American Museum of Natural History, 1962, p. 240.

I am persuaded that I am not overlapping the work already done or in progress by other scholars. The most complete bibliography on "Conversion" as computerised by the programme ATLA (Association of Theological Libraries of America) has over 2,000 titles from 1963 to 1997. Yet, none of them deals with the same subject and the same methodological procedures. Before we venture into the detailed study of this subject, I invite the reader to look at the synopsis of personal information of each interviewee in Appendix II.



CHAPTER 2:

FROM INTEGRATION TO DISINTEGRATION

2.1 EXPLANATORY INTRODUCTION

In the preceding pages we introduced Sri Lankan Tamils residing in London and had a general look at their lives as refugees. The main purposes of this chapter are: first, an attempt to understand and describe the Tamil culture as lived in the villages of the North and East provinces of Sri Lanka;¹ second, an attempt to answer the question - what happened to the coherent and well integrated social and family Tamil life in Sri Lanka?

We are not attempting a full ethnographic description of life in a Tamil village; we would rather listen to the Tamil refugees telling their stories themselves and then try to draw a picture of their life 'back home' as they see it themselves. From their recollections of life in the village "before the problems arrived,"² one infers that their culture (*kalāccāram*) was reasonably integrated and stable, and their individual and family lives were reasonably integrated in their culture. However, the field study shows that the sudden disintegration of the basic pillars of Tamil culture (*kalāccāram*), the variety of traumatic experiences and situations, the "collapse of meaning"³ among the victims of the present ethnic violence, the shock of witnessing acts of unparalleled cruelty, were the direct factors that impelled them to

¹ We concentrate our study on this circumscribed area for two reasons; a) The overwhelming majority of the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees living in London come from these specific areas; and b) all the persons interviewed come from one or other of the many villages in those two provinces. The reader will remember that there are 24,000 (1981 census) villages in Sri Lanka. According to the Sri Lanka Census Department, with the formation of the Provincial Councils, and new village (Grama Seva Niladhari) divisions, the villages have increased more than double, and the number should be around 52,000 now (1999). When Sri Lankans meet for the first time in a neutral setting, one of the first questions is: "ūr (village) from, you?"

² Tamil refugees in London very rarely use the term 'war' to refer to the present prolonged ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka; they commonly use the euphemism 'the problems.' In the narratives they use the expression "when the problems arrived."

³ Steen, Ann-Belinda, *Varieties of the Tamil Refugee Experience in Denmark and England*. *op.cit.*, p. 196.

make the transition from Sri Lanka to London; in other words, they left their villages because of violence and arrived as refugees and asylum seekers; they were not economical opportunists.

My primary intention was to hear them describe their life in London and the conditions that induced them to join the All-Tamil Pentecostal Churches in London; so my initial question to each one of them was, "How is life in London?" After the initial outburst describing their suffering and desolation in London, they went back to describe how in their villages they had everything that they missed in London; so their description of life back home is usually a series of flash-backs against the London background, and consequently I obtained from them indirect information by way of contrast to London life. I did not interrupt my informers with new questions and let them seesaw between the two poles of experience. Hence the indirect and oblique character of their information on their lives back home as contrasted with the vivid direct character of their descriptions of their present life in London. After listening again and again to their recorded conversations, I came to the realisation that their experience of misery 'out here' is interpreted in the contrasting background of their nostalgic recollection of happiness 'back there,' and then again their memories of life in their villages are bright against the dark background of their lives in London.

2.2 A HISTORICAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC OVERVIEW

Sri Lanka is a multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-religious nation, located around twenty miles off the southern tip of the Indian sub-continent. The main languages spoken in the Island are Sinhala and Tamil, with English as the lingua franca for international relations, higher studies, international and commercial transactions, etc. The three languages are now considered 'official,' and all the public signs are written in the three alphabets. The country was known as Ceylon until 22 May 1972, when it assumed its present name, adopted a new constitution and became a sovereign nation within the British Commonwealth of Nations.⁴ The present population of the island is 18,342,660 (est.). The total land area of the country is 25,332 square miles (65,610 kilometres). It has produced nearly a million refugees, both

⁴ Arasaratnam, S., "Nationalism in Sri Lanka and the Tamils" in Roberts, Michael, *Collective Identities, Nationalisms and Protest in Modern Sri Lanka*. Colombo: Marga Institute, 1979, p. 512. See also Chandrakanthan, A. J. V., *Catholic Revival in Post-Colonial Sri Lanka*. Colombo, Sri Lanka: Social & Economic Development Centre, 1995, p. 45.

internally displaced and outside Sri Lanka. A report of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in 1995 stated:

After 1990 nearly 200,000 Tamil people fled to South India as refugees, nearly 200,00 Tamils fled to Western countries as asylum seekers and an estimated 500,000 are living as refugees in Sri Lanka.⁵

It would be very difficult to obtain exact statistical information on Tamil refugees, but report of the Central Intelligence Agency on Sri Lanka, published in 1997, stated:

As of late 1996, 63,068 were housed in refugee camps in South India, another 30,000-40,000 lived outside the Indian camps, and more than 200,000 Tamils have sought political asylum in the West.⁶

Fred Iklé has touched on the social impact of war where bombs are being thrown. His analysis focussed on three main points: First, “the decision to flee depends on the extent to which a population realises the threat”;⁷ second, “In the face of actual and evident peril” people would flee “with little regard for the social inhibitions that normally govern human relations”;⁸ and the third, “this exodus is motivated by the difficult and hazardous living conditions in the stricken area” and the fear of continuation of the war.⁹ This analysis could be directly applicable to Tamil refugees; the samples collected in London show that people left their villages when they realised that their integrated culture had become disintegrated, and the prevalent political conditions posed a threat to their own existence.

The antagonism between Tamil and Sinhala speaking communities in Sri Lanka goes as far back as the first centuries of the Christian era, if we are going to give the credit of historical

⁵ Central Intelligence Agency, Office of Public Affairs: Fact sheet on Sri Lanka 1996, Internet: <http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/cc.html>

⁶ Central Intelligence Agency, Office of Public Affairs: Fact sheet on Sri Lanka 1997, Internet: <http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/ce.html>

⁷ Iklé, Fred Charles, *The Social Impact of Bomb Destruction*. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958, pp. 100-102.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-102.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-102.

accuracy to the great chronicle called the *Mahavamsa*¹⁰ believed to have been written in the fifth century AD by a Buddhist monk, composed with the object of glorifying Buddhism in Lanka and “for the edification of the reader.” It describes, among many other things, the wars of extermination waged by the Sinhala kings of Anuradhapura against their powerful enemies permanently looming beyond the Great River, the fearful Damilas (Tamils). Scholars today agree that the book is a great epic poem, and not an accurate narrative of facts as they happened, though the work is commonly called a ‘chronicle’; they contend that these stories have a kernel of historical value, but were selected, preserved, expanded and embellished to glorify the introduction and expansion of Buddhism in Lanka and also to kindle ‘nationalist’ feelings among Sinhala people against the South Indian kingdoms which attacked Sri Lankan kings at different periods of history and ruled regions in Sri Lanka.¹¹ The book must be read as an epic poem of great poetical merit, and not as a ‘chronicle’ of events as they happened. In the *Mahavamsa* (written in the Pali language) and its continuation the *Culavamsa* (prolonging the story down to the conquest of Kandy by the British in 1812), throughout the long history of Lanka, the Tamils are considered as the invaders, the enemies, the personification of evil. Killing them in war is considered a meritorious action.¹² Modern writers however, like Valentine Daniel¹³ and Serena Tennekoon¹⁴ believe that both Tamil and Sinhala writers now use myths merely to construct ethnic identities, not to confirm history.

¹⁰ The *Mahavamsa* is an ancient chronicle believed to have been written in the 5th Century of our era, presenting in literary form the story of the great Sinhala Dynasty. Geiger, W (tr.), *Mahavamsa*. Colombo, Sri Lanka: Ceylon Government Information Department, 1950.

¹¹ Wilson, A. J, *Politics in Sri Lanka 1947 - 1973. op.cit.*, p. 46.

¹² “Just rule and religious tolerance by an alien (Tamil) usurper, however, were not acceptable substitutes for national freedom, and the people (Sinhala) never reconciled themselves to this foreign domination.” Vijayawardhana, D. C., *The Revolt in the Temple*. Colombo: Sinha Publication, 1953, p. 56.

¹³ Valentine Daniel states that several Sri Lankan historians have “foreground the ‘merely mythic’ or ‘hermeneutically’ constructed aspects” of the ancient chronicles in their finely argued papers. Daniel, Valentine E., “Three Dispositions Towards the Past: One Sinhala Two Tamil”, in Seneviratne H. L. (ed.), *Identity Consciousness and the Past*. Social Analysis (special issue services), No. 25, 1989, p. 26.

¹⁴ Serena Tennekoon says that several writers in Sri Lanka present “ethnic politics in a historical idiom”. Tennekoon, Serena, “Symbolic Refractions of the Ethnic Crisis: The *Divaina* Debates on Sinhala Identity” in Abeysekera, C. & Gunasinghe N. (eds.), *Facts of Ethnicity in Sri Lanka*. Colombo, Sri Lanka: Social Scientists Association, 1987, p. 6.

We hear more about severe tensions between Tamil and Sinhala communities only in post independent Sri Lanka. After independence in 1948, when the majority Sinhala speaking people gained the majority in legislature and thus a dominating position in the country, it was only natural that they would try to change the balance of power in their favour: the democratic “rule by the people” became “rule by the majority,” and it followed that “rule by the majority” came to mean rule by the Sinhala sector of the population.¹⁵ What followed was a sad story of oppression and discrimination against the Tamil minority by the Sinhala majority governments. Sinhala people looked at indigenous Sri Lankan Tamils as members of Tamil population living in South India.¹⁶ Arasaratnam sees this as an indication that Tamils in Sri Lanka were forging cultural links with Tamil Nadu to strengthen “the roots of Tamil culture in Sri Lanka.”¹⁷ He believes that this “had the effect of exciting the latent fears of the Sinhalese.”¹⁸

On 7 July 1956, by an Act of Parliament, the Sinhala language was declared as the one and only official language of the country.¹⁹ This measure is known as ‘The Sinhala Only Act.’ Tamil was permitted “within reasonable limits” and the ‘reasonableness’ of those limits was determined, again, by the Sinhala majority.²⁰ At that time Tamils, “through their proficiency in English and their acquisition of professional skills,”²¹ depended largely on government for employment; many well-educated and qualified Tamils were employed in the civil services. The sudden change from English as the language of administration to Sinhala as the only official language of the country created a group of unemployed people and denied promotion to non-Sinhala speaking people. Wilson pointed out that the Sinhala Only Act was passed with the hope that it “would throw out most of the English-educated Sinhalese and Ceylon Tamils from positions they held in the public services.”²² Then came

¹⁵ Arasaratnam, S., “Nationalism in Sri Lanka and the Tamils”, *op.cit.*, p. 513.

¹⁶ Wilson, A. J., *Politics in Sri Lanka 1947-1973*. *op.cit.*, p. 47.

¹⁷ Arasaratnam, S., “Nationalism in Sri Lanka and the Tamils”, *op.cit.*, p. 513.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 513.

¹⁹ Wilson, A. Jeyaratnam, *Electoral Politics in an Emergent State*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 1975, p. 21.

²⁰ Nissam, Elizabeth, *Sri Lanka: A Bitter Harvest*. London: Minority Rights Group, 1996, p. 12.

²¹ Arasaratnam, S., “Nationalism in Sri Lanka and the Tamils”, *op.cit.*, p. 513.

²² Wilson, A. Jeyaratnam, *Electoral Politics in an Emergent State*. *op.cit.*, p. 21.

the first race riots and hate crimes against Tamils in 1956. This prompted and encouraged Tamils to leave Sri Lanka. This process that started after independence in 1948, was expedited by the race riots of 1956, and further accelerated with the second wave of riots in 1958. Many Tamils felt that there was no future for them in their own habitat²³, their motherland Sri Lanka; they decided to leave in quest of greener pastures in other parts of the earth. The first wave of the Tamil exodus (geographically outwards, professionally onwards, and economically upwards) began when Tamil professionals, doctors, nurses, accountants, academicians and technicians migrated to other lands, or decided to remain in the countries where they had been sent for higher studies²⁴. We shall meet them in our study as ‘the professionals’ in contrast with ‘the refugees.’ This brain drain was not considered a Tamil Diaspora, because this phenomenon was prevalent in many other countries of the Two-Thirds-World, with or without a civil war. An important fact that should be noted at this point is that this group came, predominantly, from the most socially privileged class or group, the *vēllāla*²⁵ higher caste among Tamils. The Tamils who left their motherland were fluent in English and had been educated in the English system. They easily adapted and eventually assimilated themselves in the melting pot of their adopted motherlands and became effective citizens of their host countries.

The disagreement between Tamil and Sinhala political leaders further widened month after month, with a snowball effect. In September 1973, the Tamil United Front, a Tamil political party, resolved that Tamils needed “their rights to self rule,” based on their traditionally

²³ “The years 1956-1965 were the most disturbed phase in Sinhalese-Ceylon Tamil relations and reached a climax in the bloody riots of 1958.” Wilson, A. J., *Politics in Sri Lanka 1947 - 1973. op.cit.*, p. 51.

²⁴ “Most of them came to obtain professional degrees in law, medicine, and engineering or to obtain graduate degrees that would ease them into the faculties of the universities and the civil service at home. (...) But as time went on, (...) many of these group of immigrants decided to extend their stay and practice their professions in Britain rather than in Sri Lanka.” Daniel, E. V. & Thangaraj, Y. “Forms, Formations, and Transformations of the Tamil Refugee” in Daniel, E. V. & Knudsen, J. C., *Mistrusting Refugees*. Berkeley, USA: University of California Press, 1995, p. 241. In London Tamil circles these are called ‘*the professionals*’ in counter-distinction with ‘*the refugees*.’

²⁵ See Chapter 1, footnote no.65 on ‘caste’ of this work. Also Sivathamby noted, “There were separate schools established, wherever needed, for the lower castes and it was also scrupulously seen to that those who finish their schooling from those schools do not get into schools meant for the higher castes, especially into English schools.” Sivathamby, *op.cit.* p. 49.

inhabited Tamil areas.²⁶ This further strained Tamil-Sinhala relationships and two racial riots broke out against Tamils in 1977 and 1981.²⁷ In all these riots, Tamils were killed and Tamil homes were looted and burnt. Tamils were assembled as refugees and sent to the North and East of Sri Lanka, the areas traditionally inhabited by a majority of Tamils. In other words, they were forced to abandon their habitat in the truly pluralistic and democratic areas in Sri Lanka and withdraw to Tamil areas. Two refugee students in London said:

Arul: Sinhala people thought that by forcing Sinhala language on us we would become Sinhalese. The Government said that they were trying to create unity, but they did not create unity; instead they forced their culture on us.

Sathish: Recently I went to Switzerland to visit a friend of mine. In Switzerland two languages are able to survive without any 'problems'. If one wants to write a letter in Swiss German or French both are accepted as equivalent. Why can't two languages live peacefully in one country?

The next riots against Tamils people started in July 1983, after thirteen soldiers were killed by the militants in the North of Sri Lanka. The International Commission of Jurists published a report on communal violence in Sri Lanka, in which it is stated that "all the victims on each of these occasions have been Tamils"²⁸ and the Tamils did not retaliate against the Sinhalese.²⁹ Moreover, it says that the communal violence against Tamils polarised "Tamil community on the one hand and the Sri Lanka Government on the other."³⁰ Piyadasa's book, *Sri Lanka: The Holocaust and After*, published in 1984 stated:

We have talked to people who were eyewitnesses of the killings – the beatings-to-death and burnings-alive in cold blood of individual Tamils seized, with never a case of police opposition, on the streets and in vehicles.³¹

²⁶ Arasaratnam, S., "Nationalism in Sri Lanka and the Tamils", *op.cit.*, p. 516.

²⁷ For a pro-Tamil view of those riots, see Ponambalam, Satchi, *Sri Lanka: The National Question and Tamil Struggle*. London: Zed Books, 1983, p. 5.

²⁸ Sieghart, Paul, *Sri Lanka: A Mounting Tragedy of Errors*. London: International Commission of Jurists and Justice, 1984, p.15.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³¹ Piyadasa, L., *Sri Lanka: The Holocaust and After*. London: Marram Books, 1984, p. 81.

After the 1983 racial riots against Tamils, commonly called “Black July” and also the “Tamil Holocaust,” the emerging Tamil separatist movements³² at that time became more vocal and militant. Many young Tamil boys and girls who had been plucked out and expelled “from the midst of Sinhala presence”³³ to the North and the East of Sri Lanka, and Tamils who had lost their property and loved ones in the riots joined the armed struggle asking for a separate state for Tamils. The militant groups declared their political position in a consultation between the Sri Lanka government and the militant advocates for a Tamil state, held at Thimphu, Bhutan, in July & August 1985³⁴:

We are a liberation movement, which was compelled to resort to the force of arms because all force of reason had failed to convince the successive Sri Lankan governments in the past. Further, under conditions of national oppression and the intensification of state terrorism and genocide against our people, the demand for a separate state becomes the only logical expression of the oppressed Tamil people. Our armed struggle is the manifestation of that logical expression.³⁵

The war intensified more and more. After a peace pact between the Sri Lankan President and the Indian Prime minister in July 1987, the Indian Peacekeeping Forces (IPKF) came to Sri Lanka to the North and the East provinces on 30 July 1987³⁶ to restore law and order.³⁷ At that time there were several militant groups fighting against the Sri Lankan government forces. All the militant groups accepted the peace pact made between the two heads of states,

³² The Tamil militant movements began in the 1970s. These movements originated in to assassination of Tamils who supported the ruling Sinhala governments or political parties. See also Nissan, Elizabeth. *Sri Lanka: A Bitter Harvest*. *op.cit.* p. 15.

³³ Thambiah, S. J., *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986, p. 33.

³⁴ Nissan, Elizabeth, *Sri Lanka: A Bitter Harvest*. *op.cit.* p. 17.

³⁵ Quoted from International Federation of Tamils, unpublished seminar paper presented at the seminar *Towards a Just Peace* (organised to examine the issues of Tamil people and suggest steps to a just peace in the island of Sri Lanka), at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 15th February 1992.

³⁶ Nissan, Elizabeth, *Sri Lanka: A Bitter Harvest*. *op.cit.* p.17.

³⁷ See also Rogers, John D. et al., “Sri Lanka : Political Violence and Ethnic Conflict” in *American Psychologist*. Vol.53, #7, p. 773.

with the exception of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). A war broke out between the Indian Peacekeeping Forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.³⁸

The Indian Peacekeeping Forces introduced the Tamil National Army (TNA) which, with the help of other militant groups, worked with the Indian Peacekeeping Forces and conscripted young Tamil boys to join the Tamil National Army. Hundreds and thousands of young boys fled the Tamil areas to avoid forced conscription. Some went to different areas of Sri Lanka, while others left the island for India or European countries as refugees. At this stage Sri Lankan armed forces withdrew from the normal role and stayed inside the military camps.

Although the Indian Peacekeeping Forces came to Sri Lanka at the request of the Sri Lankan President, their presence created fears among Sinhala politicians and people at large.³⁹ While the Indian Peacekeeping Forces and the other Tamil militant groups were trying to eradicate the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and restore normality in the Tamil areas, some rather controversial talks between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the new President Premadasa of Sri Lanka began in Colombo in April 1989.⁴⁰ "It is widely believed" that the Sri Lankan government has provided "the LTTE with arms in this period to use against the IPKF."⁴¹ Between January and March 1990, high level talks were held between the new President of Sri Lanka and the new Prime Minister of India, and the Indian Peacekeeping Forces left Sri Lanka in March 1990.⁴²

Immediately following this, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam stormed into Tamil areas with full force,⁴³ with armed cadres and the support of the Sri Lankan government. The Tamil National Army and other militant groups retaliated, but without the backing of the

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.773.

³⁹ "... in the Sinhala-majority areas of the south, a resurgent JVP began a campaign against the government, which it believed had betrayed Sri Lanka to the Indians. By 1990, the JVP seemed crushed,..." Rogers, John D. et al., "Sri Lanka : Political Violence and Ethnic Conflict." *Ibid.*, p. 773. "In 1987 it (JVP) began armed insurgency particularly targeting members and supporters of the government...which supported the accord." Nissan, Elizabeth, *Sri Lanka: A Bitter Harvest. op.cit.* p. 18.

⁴⁰ Nissan, Elizabeth, *Sri Lanka: A Bitter Harvest. op.cit.*, p. 18.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 17 and also see Rogers, John D. et al., "Sri Lanka : Political Violence and Ethnic Conflict." *op.cit.* p. 773.

⁴³ Nissan, Elizabeth, *Sri Lanka: A Bitter Harvest. op.cit.* p. 18.

Indian Peacekeeping Forces they soon fell prey to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and “heavy loss of life” was reported.⁴⁴ The Tamil National Army members and other militant groups were forced to withdraw to India with the Indian Peacekeeping Forces.

Peace talks between Sri Lankan government and the LTTE lasted until July 1990, then once again the war broke out between the two hostile camps.⁴⁵ The areas occupied mainly by Tamil people became divided into two, namely: the areas controlled by the government armed forces, and the LTTE controlled areas. Tamil civilians who lived under the government military controlled areas were suspected of having links with the militants; many were arrested, tortured, detained and sometimes killed. For their part, the LTTE challenged young boys and girls to join them to establish a separate state for Tamils – *Tamil Eelam*. Since the armed forces stationed in the Tamil areas of the North and East of Sri Lanka were predominantly Sinhalese speaking,⁴⁶ a language which the majority of people in the areas do not understand, it is not surprising that the Tamils in the area felt like a conquered people living in an occupied territory, and perhaps even looked on their armed militant youth as a protection against a hostile army of occupation. The Sri Lankan government communiqué in 1997 announced that more than 50,000⁴⁷ people had been killed since the armed struggle for separate homeland started.

2.3 TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF *kalāccāram* (CULTURE)

The Tamil word for ‘culture’ is *kalāccāram*, and this word appears more than 129 times in the recorded conversations and interviews, many times more than any other key word or concept, with the obvious exception of ‘the problems’. The question arises immediately: What is *kalāccāram* (culture)? Still more important: What do refugee Tamils in London mean or imply by the term *kalāccāram*? This term often comes up in the most unexpected contexts, as when interviewees try to describe their lives in London in the blackest colours:

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.18.

⁴⁵ Rogers, John D. et al., “Sri Lanka : Political Violence and Ethnic Conflict.” *op.cit.* p. 774.

⁴⁶ Piyadasa, *Sri Lanka: The Holocaust and After.* *op.cit.* pp. 78-79.

⁴⁷ Richmond Anthony reported statistical details of global ethnic conflicts. See Richmond, Anthony H., *Global Apartheid: Refugees, Racism, and the New World Order.* Ontario: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 193.

“No home here, no *kalāccāram*, no peace of mind is here, no happiness either”; “I felt lost”; “no meaning or purpose to my life, no *kalāccāram*”; “I considered killing myself”; “we are not wanted, we do not belong.” Very often my interviewees use the expressions ‘our culture’ and ‘the British culture’ as if they were in total opposition. However, when questioned about the meaning of ‘our *kalāccāram*’, they seem to be at a loss or give evasive answers. For example, in a group interview conducted among some Tamil medical students with the purpose of discovering the quality of Tamil life in London, the conversation soon turned on the meaning of *kalāccāram*. I offer here the first two entries:

Lingam: ... I think culture means ‘what we eat for lunch.’ What I mean is that what we enjoy eating depends on our culture. I think one’s food should define one’s culture.

Alagan: It’s interesting. But I cannot agree with you because I was born in this country and I enjoy English food as much as Sri Lankan food. Once you live in a country for some time, your food habits can change, right? Of course I enjoy certain Sri Lankan foods very much.

Lingam: I do not know whether I can agree with you. When I said food I meant the food different people eat in their countries. Your case is different.

Alagan: I agree. I can’t say that I have a Sri Lankan culture. I am in between. But I like to move along with Asians. I do not know why my interests are closely connected with the interests of Asians. I don’t think it is possible to sit and talk with a British person about ‘culture’, but we are enjoying this conversation, aren’t we?

This conversation, banal as it sounds, reveals several facts that deserve to be highlighted. First, for Sri Lankan Tamils food is associated to culture⁴⁸, though not all culture is food. Jothi, one of the interviewees, said that cooking and organising parties at her house was an alternative to her lonely life in London, an escape from her loneliness. Satha remarked that the focal point of Sri Lankan get-togethers is based on food. The reader would have noticed that food was used as an event to gather Kumar & Jesse’s friends at their house, the most natural thing to do. The Tamil scholar Thani Nayagam said that hospitality is an immensely important aspect of Tamil *kalāccāram*,⁴⁹ and hospitality is inconceivable without food, as hospitality in some other cultures is inconceivable without drink. T. S. Eliot reminds us that

⁴⁸ See also Srinivas, M.N., *Social Change in Modern India*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969, pp. 52-4.

⁴⁹ See Thani Nayagam, Xavier S., *Tamil Culture and its Characteristics*. (Tamil). Jaffna, Sri Lanka: Thanthai Chelva Memorial Trust, 1980, pp. 25-6.

‘food’ is nature, while the ‘cuisine’ is culture.⁵⁰ This distinction makes no sense to Tamils; when they use the word ‘food’ (*cāppāṭu*) they mean not only the provisions or staples, but a) the materials to be eaten,⁵¹ b) the laborious preparation of the food (cuisine), and c) the table manners and order to be followed at table, which has all the characteristics of a ritual with frequent religious overtones. It is no wonder that, as we shall see below, Tamil refugees in London express the mutual antagonism and estrangement between the two cultures (British and Tamil) in terms of table fellowship: “we do not invite the British to lunch and they do not invite us to tea”⁵²; when organising a get-together, “they go outside to drink (in the pub), but we go inside to eat (in the house).” The researcher observed that full meals previously prepared were provided in the All-Tamil Christian communities, after the religious service to celebrate long and joyous get-togethers (we shall call them ‘agape’ meals).⁵³ Table fellowship is perhaps the most universal symbol and ritual of equality and friendship; among Tamils table fellowship demolishes all barriers of caste, religion, education and social status.

Second, Alagan’s experience of being ‘in-between’ characterises the permanent experience of the Tamil refugees living in London, namely, the experience of ‘liminality’, though Alagan cannot be considered a refugee, no matter how much we stretch the meaning of the word: he was born in London of Tamil parents and switches constantly from one universe of meaning to the other; but with other Tamils he always ‘eats food with his fingers.’⁵⁴ This in-

⁵⁰ See Eliot, T. S., *Christianity and Culture: The Idea of a Christian society and Notes towards the definition of culture*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1960 [1949]: “If we take culture seriously, we see that a people does not need merely enough to eat (...) but a proper and particular *cuisine*: one symptom of the decline of culture in Britain is indifference to the art of preparing food. Culture may even be described as that which makes life worth living.” p. 100.

⁵¹ Ratnam & Ganesh have been to meals with British friends, but they complained that they were given food of British people. In contrast, they said, when someone is invited by Tamils, they prepare food enjoyed by the invitee. They cannot see any point in inviting someone for a meal and giving him a meal not enjoyed by the invitee.

⁵² See below Chapter 3, where it appears often in the context of mutual alienation and estrangement.

⁵³ The agape as expression of community life and means for community building and strengthening is common among communities of the ‘sect-type,’ and is a common event among Tamil Pentecostal churches in London, either on weekly or monthly basis.

⁵⁴ ‘Eating with fingers’ is the general way in Sri Lanka, from the President of the country to the lowest peasant. The inability to handle forks and spoons in London is a source of embarrassment to Tamil refugees.

between or liminal existence⁵⁵ does not create any tension in the case of Alagan, but for others it is equivalent, in the words of the interviewee Ganesh, to “a split identity.”

Third, the conversation reveals an acute culture consciousness among Tamil refugees living in London; this impression of acute culture consciousness is reinforced by analogous expressions in a fair number of my conversations (formal and informal) with Tamil refugees. Alagan is right when stating that probably “it is not possible to sit and talk with a British person about ‘culture’”; this culture consciousness may be the result of the strain of living a liminal existence, of the awareness of cultural erosion, or perhaps of a growing cultural identity crisis. All my interviewees are aware of their cultural erosion in the unavoidable process of acculturation,⁵⁶ of the impossibility to reproduce the ancestral cultural conditions in an alien milieu,⁵⁷ and also of the eventual assimilation of the British cultural mores and values by the new generation of London Tamils.⁵⁸ Hence those who had become incorporated into the Pentecostal communities emphasise the importance of the Tamil language, food and mores, even after their conversion from folk Hinduism into Pentecostal Christianity.⁵⁹ What is culture then, and more precisely, what is Sri Lankan Tamil *kalāccāram*?

⁵⁵ See below, Chapter 3, the section on ‘Liminal life’

⁵⁶ This is Thomas F Glick’s definition of ‘acculturation’: “The process of culture change set in motion by the meeting of two autonomous cultural systems, resulting in an increase of similarity of each to the other. It always involves a complex interaction with attendant social processes, ...” See entry ‘Acculturation’ in Barfield, Thomas (ed.), *The Dictionary of Anthropology*. London: Blackwell Publishers, 1997. This definition applies to the interaction of Sinhala – Tamil relations in Sri Lanka; but in London the British culture is so overwhelmingly dominant that the mutual borrowing and enriching is less noticeable.

⁵⁷ The natural and social environment of London makes it impossible to practise Hinduism the way it was practised in Sri Lanka; when all the adaptations are made, “As a Hindu I spent time in temples, and wanted to do the same here; but that was denied to me,” as Hanna one of my interviewees, remarked. Others claim that Hindu temples in London do not have the same pervading atmosphere of devoutness.

⁵⁸ Ganesh, as we shall also see in Chapter 3, said that Tamil children in London have to live in two universes of meaning, mores and values, and have to seesaw between two networks of relationships.

⁵⁹ Sivarajah claims that Jaffna Tamils are preservers of traditions. See Sivarajah, A., “Jaffna Society’s Political Leadership: Research on Family, Social and Economic Background” (Tamil) *op.cit.*, p. 199.

While Lingam states that culture is the food we eat, the nutrition that keeps us alive, Satha claims at one point that we cannot divest ourselves from our culture, because “*kalāccāram* is like our skin”⁶⁰ we are born inside a culture and carry it with us without noticing it; it can grow and undergo some changes, but we cannot leave it aside; without our culture we are no longer ourselves; so it could also be said of our *kalāccāram* that in it “we live, and move, and have our being.”⁶¹ Cultures are human creations, and humans in their way are creatures of their own cultures.⁶²

Cultures are not static, immobile creations; they are subject to change, growth and decay, and also to extinction. We inherit our *kalāccāram* with its distinctive traits almost as we inherit our skin with its specific pigmentation. Ganesh at one point in the conversation about Asians in Southall, London, said:

All the Asians have come to a city and formed their own culture; then you won't know that you are living in Britain. The people in Britain don't know that there is a place like this. So the Asians have created a ghetto here. To be in the ghetto you need to use your colour as a uniform.⁶³

We develop our culture, express ourselves through culture and are perceived by others through the medium of culture; even our silences, paradoxically, are expressions of our culture; and also even the masks we put on to conceal our identity and pretend to be what we are not, reveal also our cultural traits. We are not aware of our culture until we are confronted with other cultures, with alternative ways of relating to things, to other people and to supernatural forces; then we discover that our culture is a relative entity (not absolute and unchangeable) when it is related to another culture; with the appearance of the other with its glaring otherness, we become conscious of the ‘we’ by contrast to the ‘they’ and then many alternatives are open: uncritical acceptance of the other; critical sympathy and sympathetic criticism towards the other; dialogue and mutual understanding and enrichment; involution and refuge ‘in the castle of my skin’; total rejection of the other to the point of

⁶⁰ See also conversation with Satha in Chapter 3: ‘Liminal Life’.

⁶¹ Acts 17.28 (RSV).

⁶² What Peter Berger said about the dialectics of society is applicable to culture: Culture is the creation of man; man is a creature of culture. See Berger, Peter, *The Sacred Canopy-Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. *op.cit.*, p. 3.

⁶³ Often in London, Tamils refer to themselves as ‘Asians.’

willingness to wipe out the deviant 'other' by violent means, even to the point of extermination of the other (cultural genocide).⁶⁴

There is no single definition of culture. In fact, hundreds of definitions have been proposed. As far back as 1949, the prominent anthropologists A. L. Kroeber and C. Kluckhohn collected and critically analysed several hundred definitions, to end up with a summary formulation of the approximate consensus of them all:

Culture consists of patterns, explicit or implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i. e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action.⁶⁵

Needless to say, this summary of the scholarly 'consensus' on the meaning of culture cannot be taken as a definition of culture; it is unmanageable; at best, it looks rather like a programme of study of individual cultures from specific theoretical points of view, namely, the 'pattern theory' and the 'behaviour theory' of the meaning of culture. In the previous draft of their work the authors gave a more helpful description of the first lines as:

Culture consists in patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols...⁶⁶

One wonders why "thinking, feeling, and reacting"? Is all action a reaction? Psychologists of the behaviourist schools would say that it is so, thus denying freedom of choice and innovation. But would it not be better to include 'acting and reacting' in the definition of culture? Ruth Benedict had already defined culture in this way:

⁶⁴The 'Sinhala only Act' of 1956 and subsequent violence against Tamils in the South of Sri Lanka culminating in the 'Black July' of 1983, could be understood as an attempt at cultural genocide. Arul, one of the interviewees, said, "Sinhala people thought that by forcing Sinhala language on us we would become Sinhalese."

⁶⁵ Kroeber, A. L. & Kluckhohn Clyde, *The Concept of Culture: A Critical Review of Definitions*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953, p. 181 (Originally published as a paper of the Peabody Museum, Vol. XLI, 1950).

⁶⁶ As quoted by Kluckhohn, Clyde, "The Study of Culture" in Daniel Lerner & Harold D Lasswell (eds.), *The Policy Sciences*. Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 1951, p. 85.

A culture, like an individual, is a more or less consistent pattern for thought and action.⁶⁷

Here we could object to R. Benedict that individuals as well as cultures are not only “patterns for thought and action”; besides thinking and doing, people and cultures are also endowed with feeling and emotions, and different cultures feel differently. The Tamil aesthetic dimension is most important for understanding *kalāccāram*; and the many ways of “doing nothing” (*cumā*) are also cultural traits, and sociologists are right against some cultural anthropologists by stressing the importance of leisure time for the functioning of societies, in their study of ‘leisure’ as the many individual and social ways of spending free time creatively. Culture refers not only to activities, but also to passivities; it is not only a way of living, but also a way of dying and burying the dead and relating to them in loving remembrance. In this sense, the Tamil concept of *kalāccāram* corrects the definitions proposed the most erudite scholars on ‘culture.’

Perhaps the most comprehensive definition of culture comes from the poet/humanist T. S. Eliot; in relating religion with culture and assessing the permeating omnipresence of religion in all spheres of culture, Eliot states:

... there is an aspect in which we can see a religion as *the whole way of life* of a people, from birth to the grave, from morning to night and even in sleep, and that way of life is also its culture.⁶⁸

This definition fits the Tamil *kalāccāram* quite closely. In the Sri Lankan Tamil experience religion permeates and animates every sphere of culture, and culture permeates and animates every sphere of life; this is true not only of the Hindu religion of the majority, but also of Islam, Christianity and Buddhism. Following in the steps of T. S. Elliot in relating religion and culture, Christopher Dawson sharpens Elliot’s definition to more precision: “culture is an organised way of life which is based on a common tradition and conditioned by a common environment.”⁶⁹ This definition fits Tamil *kalāccāram*; but if we apply it to Tamilhood in London, it flounders and falls to the ground; indeed, Sri Lankan Tamil refugee

⁶⁷ Benedict, Ruth, *Patterns of Culture*. New York: Mentor Books, The New American Library of World literature, 15th Printing, 1958, p. 42.

⁶⁸ Eliot, T. S., *Christianity and Culture: The Idea of a Christian Society and Notes towards the definition of culture*. *op.cit.*, p. 103.

⁶⁹ Dawson, Christopher, *Religion and Culture*. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1948, p. 47.

life in London is truly a way of life, but it is not yet organised; Tamil refugees in London have a common tradition, but this tradition is totally unrelated to their present 'common environment.' This may explain the recurrent Tamil lament of "no *kalāccāram* here."

Another important aspect to be considered in the study of Tamil *kalāccāram* and of culture in general is the symbolic character of sounds (language), gestures, actions and movements. Satha specifically spoke about this aspect of life in Tamil refugee experience. According to him, human sounds and gestures have a hidden meaning, actions have a purpose, and special movements have a destination. When refugee Tamils came to London, within few hours every experience of their life was changed. He continued:

Some of them try to imitate British people, but soon they realise that they cannot mimic every aspect of British life. Some others try to live as Sri Lankans. They too realise that they cannot do it in another country. So they are caught up in confusion and do not know what kind of life they should live in a country like Britain.

Let us transfer a Londoner, in a twinkling of an eye, from his office in London to the midst of an oriental bazaar, let us say the Central Market of Kandy, Sri Lanka, and simultaneously a Sri Lankan Tamil peasant from his village to the midst of Piccadilly Circus at noon. Neither of the two has any money in their pocket. Both will see thousands of signs in unfamiliar alphabets, hear sounds of foreign languages, witness strange actions by individuals and groups, and people moving in all directions. Both may conclude that "these foreigners are crazy" or "I am crazy"; there is no meaning, no purpose, no direction, and no evident destination in this bustling disorder of sounds, actions and movements. Both have fallen victims of 'culture shock';⁷⁰ when this shock is prolonged, it leads to what we shall call *anomie*,⁷¹ and the state of *anomie* with its concomitant terrors may lead to actual insanity, to criminal behaviour, to suicide as Durkheim observes, or even to refuge in small clusters of meaning called 'religious communities' (religious conversion).

In cultures which are strange to us, we may not have the key to decode words, movements and actions, and may feel at a loss; but we know that those alien signs and sounds have a

⁷⁰ See Bock, Philip K. (ed.), *Culture Shock – A Reader in Modern Cultural Anthropology*. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1970, esp. pp X-XII.

⁷¹ We shall devote most of Chapter 3 to the study of *anomie* among the Tamil refugees in London.

meaning, all those actions have specific purposes, and all those movements have a direction and destination. We need a hermeneutic key to understand so many apparently disparate elements; with the correct key to understanding, we discover that all this is not chaos but a cosmos, a coherent pattern and structured system of interrelated elements. Perhaps this is what Clifford Geertz had in mind when defining culture as:

... an historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge and attitude towards life.⁷²

In its admirable conciseness, this definition does not mention artefacts and patterns of behaviour common to a group. On the other hand, some anthropologists concentrate on the study of observed regularities in people's behaviour with no concern for transcendent meanings. We believe that it is not possible to understand Sri Lankan Tamil culture if we disregard the religious symbols and meanings of daily life.

Elsewhere Clyde Kluckhohn offers a definition, which is a combination of Elliot's 'way of life' and the commonly used definition of culture as a 'design for living':

A culture refers to the distinctive way of life of a group of people, their complete "design for living."⁷³

This brief survey of some definitions of culture shows that London Tamils are not the only ones who feel puzzled when asked about the meaning of the word 'culture' that arises so often in their conversations; even cultural anthropologists seem to feel uncomfortable when they try to describe 'the essence of culture.' When I had read my field notes and listened several times to the recorded interviews, I could see a pattern in when the interviewees described the word *kalāccāram*. Although I cannot consider myself a cultural anthropologist, this pattern made me ready to offer a definition of Tamil *kalāccāram*.

⁷² Geertz, Clifford, *Interpretation of Cultures – Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books Inc., Publishers, 1973, p. 89. It is significant that this definition is offered in his essay on "Religion as a Cultural System", where he offers a definition and exegesis of culture.

⁷³ Kluckhohn, Clyde, "The Study of Culture" *op.cit.*, p. 86.

2.4 OUR OWN OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF TAMIL *kalāccāram*

Tamil *kalāccāram* is a distinctive coherent network of meaningful relationships woven and shared by a group of people in a specific geographical area. In other words, it is the way of being Tamil in life.

Sri Lankan Tamils in their villages (like any other people living in their own cultural habitat) live in a 'web of meaning' spun by themselves. This metaphor comes to me from Max Weber via Clifford Geertz, and is adopted by Geertz for one of his many definitions of culture; these are his actual words:

Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.⁷⁴

In my definition I have adopted the expression 'network of meaningful relationships' for the Weberian/Geertzian 'webs of meaning.' I think I am justified in doing so, not because "a word means just what I choose it to mean,"⁷⁵ but because my definition is more dynamic and in better accord with the Tamil ways.

This network of relationships, we can examine following the lines set by the analysis offered by the Tamil scholar Thani Nayagam, which binds together the natural, the social and the supernatural realms in a harmonious way;⁷⁶ these three realms of reality, then, are not three separate levels or layers (the physical, the social, the spiritual), but one consistent whole, intimately inter-related in each of its parts. The following examples will illustrate this.

Our first example has to do with bodily evacuations. They are a natural necessity proper to all animal organisms; they are 'nature' and not 'culture'. And yet, children have to undergo a thorough 'toilet training,' and then those functions are also somehow social and cultural,

⁷⁴ Geertz, Clifford, *Interpretation of Cultures – Selected Essays*. *op.cit.*, p. 5.

⁷⁵ These are the celebrated words of Humpty-Dumpty in Lewis Carroll's known book *Through the looking-glass*. See Carroll, Lewis [pseud.], *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Through the looking-glass and The hunting of the snark*. New York: The Modern Library, no. 79, p.247.

⁷⁶ See Thani Nayagam, Xavier S., *Tamil Culture and its Characteristics*. (Tamil). *op.cit.* pp. 18-30.

relating the person directly with nature, and indirectly with other persons. But in Tamil Sri Lanka, they may also relate the person with the guardian deities of the household. I met Thamoatham, a seventy-two year old man, near a Murukan Hindu temple in London. Thamoatham said at one point:

I left my compound (*valavu*) and tried to settle down in my son's house in London; but daily I find it very uncomfortable to adjust myself. Do you know what happened today? I went to wash my hair, and as soon as I came out (...), my daughter-in-law called my son and said, "Come and see the bathroom! (...) If you bring here people who have urinated under trees and let them use a proper toilet, this is what happens!" I felt humiliated. I don't understand anything here.

And then good Thamoatham proceeded to explain the things he does not understand here:

The toilet (*kakkūcu*) is unholy and should be built outside the house, not inside. The house is god's (*kaṭavul*) dwelling place. The white man (*vellaikkāraṇ*) does not know anything about our religious practices (*āccāram*) and built the toilet inside the house. May be this has been done because there is no compound (*valavu*). Moreover, after I use the toilet, there is no water system to wash my bottom. My daughter-in-law says that I should use toilet paper. But can I use toilet paper and then come to this *Murukaṇ* temple? It is very unholy to do that, *tampi*. There were few drops of water in the bathroom. Whether they were drops of water or of urine, I don't know. In Sri Lanka I had a big square compound, a nice house with a proper toilet in the compound, not inside the house; but I never bothered to use the toilet, *tampi*; but here now, how can I learn all these things?

Our second example is eating. There is nothing more natural than this biological function; plants and animals have to ingest their food to keep alive. Again, food ingestion is nature, not culture. We made a passing reference to the socially gathering effect of 'food' in Tamil Sri Lanka. Now we will see how 'food' is a knot in the network of relationships: the ritual of 'eating food' (*cāpiṭṭal*) binds together the ingredients taken from nature, the tradition of the culinary art, the family hierarchical ordering, the social solidarity with friends and neighbours, and also communion with the deities.⁷⁷ In the ritual of 'eating our food' the first two lines of communication (nature and family) are evident and universal in human cultures;

⁷⁷ See also Srinivas, M. N., *Social Change in Modern India. op.cit.* p. 53.

the second and the third (social and religious) are also very widespread⁷⁸, and in Tamil culture adopt some peculiar characteristics. When Tamil housewives cook something specially tasty, it is very common among them to keep portions and share their meals with neighbours and friends, thus establishing and strengthening the links of solidarity among them; so ‘food’ also has a social function of community building and of relating with other households in a closely interwoven network of affective relationships. And also ‘food’ relates us with the deities. Let us look at Hanna’s testimony:

[In Colombo] I used to fast on Saturdays for *saṇi pakavaṇ* [corresponding to the god Saturn]. Within few days of my arrival I fasted and before I ate, I will have to give food to *saṇi pakavaṇ*. We give food to the *kākam* (crow) because *kākam* is the vehicle of the god *saṇi pakavaṇ*. I cooked food, put it on a plate and went outside the house, but I could not see a single crow. I came home and sadly had my meal. My sister told me that they rarely see a crow in the vicinity. On the following Saturday I heard a crow’s sound in a nearby park. I quickly put food on a plate and went to the park in search of the crow, but I didn’t see one. I was sad again. There were lots of pigeons on the park. I thought at least I should give the food to the pigeons, but they did not eat my rice and curry. An old lady brought a dog inside the park, I thought *saṇi pakavāṇ* did not eat my food, but at least *vairavar*⁷⁹ will eat. The dog came closer to the plate, smelled it, but went on another way. My food had become not even eatable to a dog (*nay tinnā cāppāṭu*). Later my sister told me that the pet dogs here eat tinned food, not the leftovers as in Sri Lanka.

If the animals eat the food, it means that the gods whose vehicles are those animals, are propitiated by accepting the food. The very same food we eat is shared in communion with the deities, thus strengthening the covenant relationship with the gods that cohabit with their devotees in the bosom of the household.⁸⁰ Hanna went to stay with her sister in Holland, and there she had an experience analogous to Thamotharam’s, namely, the horror of living in a house that is being constantly defiled. Hanna:

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁷⁹ *vairavar* is another deity and his vehicle is the dog.

⁸⁰ Among Hindus in India a similar pattern was observed by Srinivas: “The food had to be cooked while the women were in ritually pure state, since it was offered first to the domestic deities before being served to the members of the family.” See Srinivas, M. N., *Social Change in Modern India. op.cit.* p. 53.

[In my sister's house, Holland] I wanted to observe my religion with all its ceremonies; yet I could not perform even a single one, because my sister cooked beef (*māṭṭu iraicci*) everyday in her house. How could it be possible to perform fasting and religious observances when they are acting in an anti-Hindu manner at home?

Muslims in Sri Lanka would refuse to enter a house that is defiled by the keeping and consuming of pork, orthodox Hindus would find it impossible to make *pūcai* (worship) or concentrate in devotions (*pakti*) if the place is defiled by the presence of beef, 'cow carrion.' Tamils worship their deities through the mediation of the products of nature and of the manufactured products of human ingenuity (incense and garlands), thus again joining the three spheres in one single act of adoration.

2.5 CULTURAL DISINTEGRATION AND INTEGRATION INTO THE CULTURE

It seems easier to define 'cultural disintegration' than the positive 'cultural integration'; we discover the meaning and value of health when we are sick; we discover the meaning and value of integration of a culture when that culture is crumbling and on its way to disintegration. We saw that scholars of culture have attempted hundreds of ways to describe complete configurations of cultures as integral units composed of multiple traits; if there was disagreement about the concept of culture, one can expect as much disagreement in the concept of 'cultural integration.'

Ruth Benedict in her book *Patterns of Culture*, studies three small and simple cultures and devotes most of her book to a long meditation on culture and the integration of culture. She visualises cultures as integrated wholes, and not as aggregates of cultural traits of specific groups; she describes her meaning by way of analogy:

The whole, as modern science is insisting in many fields, is not merely the sum of all its parts, but the result of a unique arrangement and interrelation of the parts that has brought about a new entity. Gunpowder is not merely the sum of sulphur and charcoal and saltpetre, and no amount of knowledge of all three of its elements in all the forms they take in the natural world will demonstrate the nature of gunpowder. New potentialities have come into being in the resulting compound that were not present in its elements, and its mode of behaviour is definitely changed from that of any of its elements in other combinations.

Cultures, likewise, are more than the sum of their traits. We may know all about the distribution of a tribe's form of marriage, ritual dances, and puberty initiations, and yet understand nothing of the culture as a whole which has used these elements to its own purpose ⁸¹

In principle it is difficult not to agree with Benedict. This can also be illustrated, turning to Sri Lanka, with the science of medicine. The traditional ayurvedic and folk medicine in Sri Lanka considers the human organism as a complete whole, and attempts to restore the wholeness of the body when its balance has been destroyed by any malady. However, the overwhelming majority of Sri Lankans - while still subject to the ancestral wisdom of ayurvedic medicine - will have recourse to modern Western medicine, that attempts to give a specific remedy to the part of the body that shows signs of imbalance of the whole. The same can be said of cultural studies. The science of culture is so vast nowadays that it seems practically impossible to study 'whole' cultures, and ethnologists usually concentrate on aspects or phases of cultures.

Benedict's remarks agree with her theory of culture as 'pattern,' and offer a rather static conception of culture. Her proposal could imaginably be applicable to small and simple cultural units; but it would be impossible in a culture as complex and diversified as Sri Lankan Tamil culture in the North and East provinces, open to the influences of all imaginable cultures, but especially to the North and East (Indian cultures), the South (Sinhala culture) and the West (modern technological culture and civilisation).

Sri Lankan Tamil life is an open culture, and has been open to alien influences for over two millennia now; and yet it preserves its observable stability and identity. It enjoys a high degree of elasticity, so typical of Hinduism. Tamils are certainly a people with a culture; but they are also a people without a nation and without a State. If the State is the most formidable creation of a culture (the peculiar mode of distributing and administering the power that comes from and reposes on the people), then Tamils have not been the organisers and administrators of their own power at least for the last five hundred years, and they are not now after the independence of Ceylon and its constitution into a sovereign nation; and in the modern Socialist Democratic Republic of Sri Lanka, Tamils are aware that Sri Lanka is in fact a Sinhala nation with a Sinhala State represented by the symbol of a Sinhala flag. Sri

⁸¹ Benedict, Ruth, *Patterns of Culture. op.cit.*, pp. 42-43.

Lankan Tamils sometimes do not seem to be sure whether they are a prolongation of India's Tamil Nadu or the periphery of a Sinhala nation. So in this respect we cannot claim that Sri Lankan Tamil culture is 'tightly integrated'; it is too complex for that. Ruth Benedict's study seems to make cultures coextensive with society, as total units; but Sri Lanka Tamilhood is a culture encircled by a larger pluralistic society, where the dominant culture (Sinhala) is permanently attempting to assert its hegemony over the others.

We can multiply the examples (systems of roads and railways built by the British, the monetary and banking systems adapted to international needs, etc.) to prove that Tamil life is not as tightly integrated a culture as is often stated. And yet, Sri Lankan Tamil culture is still an indivisible whole, a culture with its own stability and continuity, its distinctiveness and identity. What makes for its stability, continuity, distinctiveness and identity? If we put this question to London Tamil refugees, it has to be worded in simple terms such as: "What are the things you miss most in London?"⁸² Though I did not ask this question directly, from their testimonies it becomes evident that the things they miss most are, in this order:

1. The house (*vīṭu*);
2. The temple (*kōvil*);
3. The village (*ūr*);

These are the constants, we would say the three pillars on which Sri Lankan Tamil culture is built. The house includes the compound with trees and household animals, and the immediate family; the temple includes festivals and also all the leisure activities that take place in the temple precinct; and the village includes friends and relatives, acquaintances and festivals celebrated in the temple and then prolonged into the streets of the village, thus abolishing the distinction of sacred and profane realms. All other things, important as they

⁸² According to the above quoted Philip K. Bock in his 'Forward: On "culture shock"', "Culture, in its broadest sense, is what makes you a stranger when you are away from home." Bock, Philip K. (ed.), *Culture Shock – A Reader in Modern Cultural Anthropology*. *op.cit.*, p. IX. Changing this seemingly ethnocentric definition, we can equally say that "culture is everything that makes you feel at home when you are at home." The things you miss most in an alien habitat could be said to be your 'culture'; if so, we are justified in saying that the three pillars of Tamil *kalāccāram* are 'the house', 'the temple' and 'the village.'

may be, are cultural variables that may change without substantially disturbing the unity and identity of the intricate network of relationships.

When Tamil refugees began to throng some areas of London, quite often, according to Mary, they were contemptuously called “Pakis” and looked upon with scorn, mistrust and, when the labour conditions were not secure, with open hostility. Ganesh, another Tamil refugee, said that British people look at Sri Lankan refugees with suspicion as “They have come to take our jobs and buy our houses; they pose a threat to us.” More often than not they themselves feel threatened by the same society that magnanimously gave them asylum and protection and sometimes they are the chosen targets of hooligan violence.⁸³ According to Vimalan, another interviewee, Tamil refugees feel insecure, weak and vulnerable in London. To escape fear, Satha said that they choose to live in tight clusters of companions and families who share the same memories ‘back home’ and the same predicament ‘out here.’ Satha further said:

If one transfers a Sri Lankan family to a place like York or some other British town they will not stay there. For them location is more important than their profession. Sri Lankans who came earlier went all over Britain and settled down among the British people. For them their profession was more important and then followed the complete assimilation to British life. Present Sri Lankans will prefer to lead a Sri Lankan life here.

In these clusters of Tamilhood in London refugees are striving to preserve and assert their own cultural identity by replicating, as far as it is possible, the communal atmosphere of their houses and villages with the distinctive sounds of song and laughter, and the smell of incense and spices. They feel insecure and vulnerable, according to Ganesh, ‘outside’ (meaning the wider British society often termed as ‘them’), but secure and strong in the safety of the “inside” (meaning the Tamil clusters of the ghetto and the family, often termed as ‘we’); in the intimate bosom of friends and relatives they can proclaim that we are who we are, in our different and distinctive uniqueness.

⁸³ Several of my interviewees expressed to me their fear when travelling alone; others related incidents of gang violence perpetrated against them; Ratnam the solicitor related several cases of petty hate crimes against Sri Lankan refugee Tamils and of police negligence in dealing with them adequately. A Refugee Council publication stated, “On 29 December 1991 a Sri Lankan refugee, Panchadcharam Sahitharan, was assaulted by racist thugs in East London, and died four days later without regaining consciousness.” Hensman, Rohini *Journey Without a Destination*. London: The Refugee Council, 1993, p. 5.

Among Sri Lankan refugee Tamils, 'Tamil' is their identifying substantive; 'Sri Lankan' is their qualifying adjective. Satha became member of a Tamil congregation because:

I like the Tamil language. Like me several Hindus went to Tamil churches purely because we loved our language.

They have their own collective identity and their own individual identities. Each one of them has a personal name and a unique history to tell, a family and friends he/she loves, and also some enemies he/she hates; and together they are the bearers of a rich cultural heritage and a history of struggle, of victory and defeat, of celebration and mourning and hope. They are not only 'cases' in immigration files⁸⁴, but also people of flesh and blood, capable of tenderness and rage, with their own ways of expressing or concealing their feelings. By listening to their conversations in the easy-going atmosphere of their get-togethers,⁸⁵ the researcher feels that they hate things as they are and love things as they used to be and they see blurred visions of hope.

In the following section we shall study, then, Tamil cultural integration as viewed by the London Tamils from the perspective of their exile and cultural captivity in a foreign land.

2.6 THE HOUSE (*vīṭu*)

What is it that gives a human being the feeling of house, of 'home'? What happens if one loses it? Like in the case of *kalāccāram*, one could say that we understand the feeling of 'home' when we have lost it temporarily or irreparably. This was my experience when I listened to Tamil refugees in London constantly lamenting the loss of their homes and families. The constant contacts with the Tamil refugees led me to a deeper understanding

⁸⁴ For a more detailed explanation of immigration regulations in Britain, see *Immigration and Nationality: Aspects of Britain*. London: HMSO, 1993.

⁸⁵ The terms 'get-together' and 'socialisation' are synonymous in Tamil parlance. They refer to the custom of joining together for no other purpose than being together, chatting, singing, occasional gossiping and laughing. In sociology the term socialisation refers to "The process by which human beings are induced to adopt the standards of behaviour, norms, rules and values of their social world. ... They begin in infancy and continue through life." Outwaite, William & Bottomore, Tom (eds.). Entry "Socialisation" in *The Blackwell Dictionary of Twentieth-Century social Thought*. London: Blackwell, 1993.

house/family/compound; the ‘*vīṭu valavu*’ (house, compound⁸⁶) surrounded by solid fence (*vēli*)⁸⁷ is a most important concept in Tamil life. The concept of *vīṭu valavu* came up for conversation under four circumstances in the interviews.

1. When Tamil refugees described the destruction of their *vīṭu valavu* in Sri Lanka.
2. When they compared their *vīṭu valavu* with their accommodation in London.
3. When their hope for a better (*vīṭu valavu*) life in London is lost.
4. When they felt that they were unable to manage their *vīṭu valavu* (houses/flats) in London in the way they used to manage it in Sri Lanka.

2.6.1 LOST *vīṭu valavu* IN SRI LANKA

Sinathurai was born in the island of Allaipeddy, a farming village near Jaffna, in 1957. His parents were farmers. He has one elder and three younger sisters and two younger brothers. His brothers were very small; so as a grown up boy among four girls he was given all the privileges in the house and the parents loved him dearly. He was not allowed to do any hard work, especially in the farm as normally all the male children of farmers would do. He did not learn farming, but was sent to school. After he had completed G.C.E. (O/L), he went to Colombo to work in a grocery shop managed by one of his relatives. After a while he joined a jewellery shop, then a textile shop, a paper wholesale shop, and finally came back to Jaffna to work in a restaurant owned by another relative.

Until he had reached 28 years he was doing various jobs in different parts of Sri Lanka; but within him he had an ambition: to have a house of his own and earn enough money to give dowry for his two younger sisters. Sinathurai’s father was able to save enough money to give dowry for the eldest daughter. Later, the father borrowed money to give dowry for the

⁸⁶ In UK English usage a small piece of land adjoining the house is called garden; but Sri Lankan Tamils use the word *compound* to describe the same. The Tamil word for compound is *valavu*.

⁸⁷ Rows of small trees are planted close to one another, so as to constitute quite a satisfactory fence; “they are generally laced together in addition with two to six strands of barbed wire or rope” (or coconut or Palmyra palm leaves, commonly known as *Cajans*) “and thus make them goat-proof and cow-proof and even chicken-proof.” These trees “grow quickly, produce many leafy little branches and do not die when virtually all the new growth and leaves are cut off to be fed to goats or used as green fertiliser.” Holmes, W Robert, *Jaffna (Sri Lanka) 1980. op.cit.*, pp. 53-57.

second daughter. At this point Sinathurai realised that it was his turn to work towards his goals. Initially he considered his responsibility to support his parents in finding dowry to marry his other two sisters, then he could earn money to build a *vīṭu* of his own. The ambition of every Tamil male in Sri Lanka is summarised in the proverb: “Build a house, plant a tree, have a son.”⁸⁸ At that period many people were travelling to the Middle Eastern countries for various jobs, and he went to Saudi Arabia in 1984 and worked there until 1990. Six years of savings “to build a house, plant a tree and have a son”: his own *vīṭu* with a *valavu*, his own wife and family.

Sinathurai’s life was focussed on earning enough money to build a *vīṭu*. That was his ambition, purpose and goal of life during the six years while he worked as a labourer in Saudi Arabia. He said:

[In Saudi Arabia] my friends organised parties and bought good clothes, but I did not do that. I bought stuff needed for my new house. I saved every cent and sent it to my father for dowry and to build a *vīṭu*.

One sister got married and his house construction programme began. Sinathurai’s father took up the responsibility of building a house for Sinathurai. Every month Sinathurai remitted money to his father and he (the father) shouldered the responsibility, from finding a suitable land for building a house with the available money sent by Sinathurai. The building work progressed monthly, with the remittance money sent by Sinathurai for this purpose. According to Sinathurai, he did not know the plan or location of the house, but he said:

Appā (father) did everything in consultation with the *pañcāṅkam*.⁸⁹ We suffered a lot to find money to pay dowries for my sisters. So, I thought, as I owned a *vīṭu* I should marry someone without demanding dowry.

Sinathurai felt really happy to share with the researcher the important ambition in his life. Every time his face brightened when he mentioned that he was able to achieve the goal of his

⁸⁸ I am indebted for this to my friend the Rev. Joshua Ratnam, an unfathomable well of Tamil folklore.

⁸⁹ The *pañcāṅkam* gives the auspicious and inauspicious days of all the social, educational and economic activities ranging from a wedding to admitting children to school, to harvesting and to the dates of all the important annual seasonal festivals. Sivathamby, K., *Sri Lankan Tamil Society and Politics*, *op.cit.* pp. 36 & 37.

life. When Sinathurai came back in February 1990 the house was ready for the house-warming ceremony (*vītu kuṭi pukutal*)⁹⁰. He said that he had achieved a status in his village:

My status (*matippu*) had gone up by being the owner of a house.

His dream, savings, plans, and ambitions were shattered when the house was completely destroyed within few months after *vītu kuṭi pukutal*. He continued the saga of destruction with darkened face, tears and anger:

Then the war broke out, my *vītu* was completely destroyed and all the household things (*vītu cāmāṅkal*) were looted... [Crying] I lost all my six years hard-earned savings just in two days of military operation.

He became a refugee within Sri Lanka where his parents and relatives requested him to marry:

I wasn't very eager to get married, but my relatives said that I should get married; so I got married in 1991.

Sinathurai's story highlights several points about the concept of *vītu* in Tamil life. After loosing the house Sinathurai does not want to remain in Jaffna as a refugee. His life became meaningless and within months after marriage he left Jaffna and went to Colombo; once again he did small jobs to support his family, but within him, he said:

I wanted to build another *vītu*. Doing small jobs in Colombo made me feel worthless.

Sinathurai decided to leave the country, leaving behind his wife and three-year-old child. The decision to leave his family was hard, but he did not want to remain in Sri Lanka without a *vītu*. Through a travel agent he organised the journey. Sinathurai continued:

I didn't have a chance to meet my wife before I left Sri Lanka. I knew that I won't meet the family for several years, but I felt that I did not have any other choice but to leave the country.

⁹⁰ The official entrance to the house with religious rites, also known as *kirakapiravēcam*. See Daniel, E. Valentine, *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1987, pp. 139-40.

Suthan is a student living in Colombo, but his parents are now refugees in London. His brothers and sisters are spread out in Colombo and abroad. He decided to stay in Sri Lanka. Suthan managed to visit Jaffna with a group of students in a journey of good will. On his return, Suthan shows me a collection of photographs of desolation. This conversation ensues:

Suthan: And this is my *vītu* in Jaffna.

Me: Still is?

Suthan: Well, it was my house. This is what remains of it. You see, no roof. Three walls and a heap of debris.

Me: What happened?

Suthan: It has been destroyed twice. First time it was during the bombings. My parents tried to salvage as much as they could and we all fled to Colombo for our lives. You know, my father was a clerical officer; not rich, but well established. Then came the Peace Accord and we all went back to Jaffna. We rebuilt the house exactly as it was before. We spent all our savings.

Me: And Then?

Suthan: Well, this time the destruction was complete, during the great offensive. We had to flee for our lives. My father went to London and later my mother joined him. The house was destroyed and looted. Everything flattened. We used to have twenty coconut trees and four mango trees in our *vītu*.

Me: In the *vītu*?

Suthan: Well, in the *valavu*, of course!

Me: Where are the trees?

Suthan: They were all felled. For better shooting, so that the 'boys' may not hide behind. Ah, what mangoes we had!

Me: Do you hope to rebuild it one day?

Suthan: Ah! All the family scattered. Father in London with a refugee status. And the war still going on. And no signs of a lasting peace. I just don't know, I just don't know!

We see and hear thousands of refugees leaving their traditionally inhabited areas and forced to go to unknown areas for survival. They would tell us many more stories about their houses, but the word *vītu* in their recollections is prominent; it deserves a deep and extensive study to understand Tamil culture. In this study we can only scratch the surface. In Sinathurai's life losing the *vītu* does not only mean losing a real property. With the loss of his *valavu* he felt he had lost his being as a person in his village. He lost the status of being considered high class. His intimate bond with the house looks like a psychological projection of Sinathurai, but this projection was so powerful that forced Sinathurai to leave all the kith and kin and go to an unknown land that he assumed would provide ways of compensating him from the shock of losing his *vītu*.

Thamotharam, the old man we have met in the pages above, talked emotionally about the concept of *valavu*. “One day...” Thamotharam stopped for few minutes; then I saw his eyes filled with tears. He waited, regained his strength and started,

In August 1990, around 3.30 p.m. a shell fired from a military base at Palaly fell and blasted near my *vītu* and my wife *Parvathi*, who was in the *valavu*, died on the spot. (...)

My son (in London) compelled me saying that he will not come back to Sri Lanka and there won't be anyone to complete my funeral rites. My wife left me alone in this world. My son said he wouldn't come to see me in Sri Lanka. Can I die like an orphan (*aṇāttai*) in my *valavu*?

Thamotharam sold his property cheaply to collect money for his journey; his son also sent some money; with the help of a travel agent the old man landed in London in 1995. He stopped talking, sat quietly for a while, then I started the conversation:

aiyā! Where is your *vītu*?

vītu? What *vītu*? I lost my *vītu*, *tampi*. There is no *vītu* in London. In London we have only *kaṭṭāṇkal* (buildings) My *vītu* was in Jaffna.

I was puzzled and Thamotharam explained;

tampi! I have no *vītu*. *kaṭṭāṇkal* cannot become *vītu*. I need to touch the *valavu maṇ* (compound sand), may be that can give me some satisfaction. The day I decided to sell my *vītu valavu* I lost my meaning in life.

Thamotharam is in London and at his age he will not be able to go back to his village in Sri Lanka. Yet, still he says “My *vītu* is in Jaffna”. This explains the core of the meaning of Tamil *vītu*. House and compound (*vītu valavu*) of the Tamil society is that grouping ordinance that turns the mere individuals to a Sri Lankan Tamil person with a common culture for life together. Without *vītu valavu*, Tamil people will lose their meaning in life and lose their inner peace. Thamotharam continued:

I now feel that I was forced to be confined to four walls of a *kaṭṭam* (building) until I die in London.

A building or structure cannot form a Tamil *vītu* and no common garden or public park can replace the *valavu* on which a *vītu* is built. I begin to understand Thamotharam's torment about *valavu*:

I planted several trees with my own hands, *tampi!* My coconut trees would be bearing coconuts now. If I were in my *vītu* I could have plucked

mangoes (...) m... m. *tampi!* I planted several fruit trees, vegetables and flowering shrubs for beauty and utility in my garden. I made use of every piece of land, that was my life, enjoyment and whole purpose of being a farmer in Jaffna.

Sinathurai and Thamothearam's stories make our understanding more clear. The *vītu valavu* forms an integral communion in Tamil life. In this communion a Tamil person would feel as a whole integrated personality, close to the soil. If that is taken away, then it forms a vacuum, which other material benefits cannot replace. The Tamil refugees in London may be able to buy a house in London, but it cannot give the same conceptual meaning of *vītu valavu* in their Sri Lankan Tamil village. Lingam, a Sri Lankan student in London, explained this clearly:

[Tamil refugees] do not find themselves comfortable because they can't buy a property with a *valavu*. You should come and see a Tamil house surrounded with *vēli* in Sri Lanka. Now they feel insecure in London. (...) They feel that they have no privacy. (...) If you do not have a property, you are worthless. You can't be a respected person in society...

They need to have a property with compound to feel 'comfortable'. People feel insecure and uncomfortable because their comfortable condition was altered by the context of the present house. Thamothearam's statement of "my life, enjoyment and whole purpose of being a farmer" shows the close bonding one can get to the house and compound. When that 'life and enjoyment' is removed from a person, then his 'purpose' in life is 'lost'. One begins to live a life without happiness, without peace of mind, and so without any purpose for living. The Sri Lankan Tamil historical, social and cultural context, one can say, then emerges from *vītu valavu* as Holmes puts it: "A place one feels safe, relaxed and secure to store his treasure."⁹¹ Moreover, the concept of house and compound enables a person to identify with a specific group of people who live with the same conceptual background. There is no one distinctive grouping among Tamil people; it is divergent and varied and becomes very complex to analyse, due to the different caste groupings.⁹² Yet there are commonalities that weave every Tamil village into a unified Tamil society. It is desirable to understand these patterns to understand the unifying link that brings every Sri Lankan Tamil under one broad umbrella called Sri Lankan Tamilhood. However, Sri Lankan Tamils see a solid substructure

⁹¹ Holmes, W Robert, *Jaffna (Sri Lanka)* 1980. *op.cit.*, p. 54.

⁹²For details about caste groupings see *Ibid.*, pp. 202-240.

to Tamil life, the whole area of *vīṭu valavu* becomes an enlargement of one's house.⁹³ You do not feel lonely, isolated, threatened because "you and yours are sealed in, safe and sound, in your compound."⁹⁴ In Thamoatham's words:

The modern life I am enjoying in London does not compensate for the loss of *vīṭu valavu* that I enjoyed in Sri Lanka.

2.6.2 *vīṭu valavu* IN SRI LANKA AND LONDON

Besides the conversations with Thamoatham, Sinathurai, Suthan and others, the topic of house and compound came up in different occasions in my interviews. Interestingly, only in the context of casual conversations did the subject of *vīṭu valavu* come up for discussion. Over and over again, the interviewees invited the researcher to come to their houses for interviews. When the researcher goes to a Tamil home to conduct an interview, one of the first questions is: "What about your meal (*cāppāṭu*)?" That means that the researcher is welcome to have a meal with them. If the researcher says "thank you, I have already eaten my meal", then the conversation turns to the subject of what you had for your meal and how tasty it was. Often this is followed by questions on the accommodation of the researcher in London and proceeds to the topic of their *vīṭu* in London; often 'Council *vīṭu*' is discussed with expressions of disgust. I became aware of this awkwardness from the day I went to my friend Kumar's home in a council flat, until I finished the field study.⁹⁵ I realised that the living conditions of Tamil refugees prompted them to talk about *vīṭu valavu* in Sri Lanka.

Jothi lived in a council house and was exploring the possibilities of buying a house for her family; she told me that the negative prefix to '*vīṭu valavu*' is 'Council *vīṭu*'. The negativism of the Council houses depended on the appearance, size and the "absence of *valavu*." Ratnam and Lingam told me that the *vīṭu valavu* gave the Tamil people a sense of happiness, of profound satisfaction; a variety of elements showed their intimate bond, their harmony and meaning for the whole. Suthan's parents invested everything they had salvaged and their earnings in Colombo to rebuild their *vīṭu valavu*, only to see it destroyed few months after

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁹⁵ To understand refugee settlement in Britain the reader is invited to consult Wood, Jenny Carry & et al., *The Settlement of Refugees in Britain (Home Office Research Study 141)*. London: HMSO, 1995

completion. Lingam specifically mentioned how people felt easy and relaxed and safe with their *valavu* around their *vītu* in Jaffna. Lingam's parents' hard-earned savings were invested on a *vītu valavu*; they are so attached to their house that they won't leave the *vītu* even at the peak of war, at the risk of losing their lives. The following conversation between Lingam and Alagan shows this:

Lingam: That's right, my parents are not willing to leave Chavakachcheri; I think I should go back to Sri Lanka.

Alagan: Why are they not willing to leave?

Lingam: My mother worked as a trained teacher and my father worked in a government department. They lived in different parts of Sri Lanka, but they invested all of her savings on a *vītu* in my village. Both of them now feel, specially my mother, that they can't leave the *vītu valavu*. My father agrees with my mother.

Others like Mary, Krishna, Jeya, and Ganesh, talked about *vītu valavu* in comparison with their council houses in London. Out of twenty-one people I interviewed, sixteen live in council houses⁹⁶. The happiness of possessing a *vītu valavu* in Sri Lanka became a topic of discussion, because of the heartbreaking experiences that they met in the Council houses. Many of them said that they experience some kind of hatred and hostility in and around the Council houses. When Jothi told me this, I asked her whether she called that racism, but she said "no". Neither Ganesh, nor Mary used the word 'racism'.⁹⁷ Jothi lives in a high rise Council flat. She shared her experience in the following way:

One day I went with my children to the children's park near our Council house. There were some white neighbours and their children playing. My son, who is 7 years old, went to play with one of the white girls of his same age. In few minutes the girl's mother shouted at the girl and called her to come and scolded with *uttai peccu* (bad words) (...) In Sri Lanka, we had a *vītu valavu* and that gave us status in life. People respected us for

⁹⁶ According to the Tamil refugees, as soon as a refugee application is processed and temporary visa to remain in UK is granted, they are allowed apply for accommodation. Single people get shared accommodation; families get flats, depending on the size of the family. Often accommodation is given in Council houses.

⁹⁷ James Watson noted, "Racism is the single most important fact of life for large numbers of south Asian and Caribbean peoples in Britain. One cannot understand the history and character of these minorities without analysing their different reactions to White racism." Watson, James L., "Introduction: Immigration, Ethnicity, and class in Britain" in Watson, J. L (ed.), *Between Two Cultures*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978, p. 2.

what we were, but in London I feel I am a third grade citizen. I do not know why I've got an inferiority complex in UK.

There is a reason why my interviewees and other Tamils felt uncomfortable about their accommodation in London. Two points came up in the comparative analysis of their houses in London. They feel that their lives in Council houses have become somehow vulnerable; vulnerable in their own house! The overcrowding in those houses deleteriously affected the Tamil concept of *vīṭu*. *Vīṭu*, as Sinathurai and Thamothearam discussed, is a meaningful reality, a something which can create meaningful relationships and happiness for the people who live there. If the house cannot do that, then it is an inauspicious (*rāci illāta*) house. An inauspicious house will not allow the people to lead a happy and contented life (*vāḷa viṭātū*). For Tamil refugees their *vīṭu* did not provide happiness, or even contentment with life, like any other human person. A grumble from Mary explained this situation clearly:

We use many spices for cooking. When I was in Pandatherippu, it was not a problem because it was an auspicious house (*rāciyāṇa vīṭu*). It had plenty of ventilation; but this house in London was constructed without *kilakku vācal* (eastern door)⁹⁸. If I cook with closed windows, the house smells. Our clothes, furniture, and every item in the house smell, but I can't open my windows. If I open the door my neighbours would not like it. They once told me that they don't like the smell.⁹⁹ This house is a *rāci illāta vīṭu* (an inauspicious house).

Mary complained about the atmosphere in which she lived. Although she talked about an unpleasant situation created by her cooking, the real cause of the problem was her house rather than her act. The solution to the problem is to leave the place and buy an auspicious (*rāciyāṇa*) house; but to do that they need a better financial situation. Incidents like these, a feeling of disgust, plus the inhospitable atmosphere around their houses (*vīṭu*) force more and more to think of their dwelling in Sri Lanka with nostalgia; it was a protective enclosure where they could be what they are.

⁹⁸ Mary explained to me that the Tamil belief is that a door on the eastern side of the house was necessary for a house to be auspicious. A properly constructed house should have an eastern door to face the rising sun. If there is no eastern door, people in the house may face problems.

⁹⁹ Christopher McDowell also observed that in Switzerland, "when cooking, Tamils were advised to keep their windows closed, lest the spicy smell invade the kitchens of neighbours,..." McDowell, Christopher, *A Tamil Asylum Diaspora*. op.cit. p. 231.

2.6.3 LOST HOPE OF A BETTER *vītu valavu* IN LONDON

Singam comes from a very poor family in Sri Lanka and we shall encounter him again in Chapter 4; he had no *vītu valavu* in Sri Lanka, so he was nothing, like a non-being.

I come from a very poor family from Vaddukoddai, where many economically poor people live.

He studied up to grade five and his family situation did not allow him to study further. His father did labouring jobs in various places and his earnings did not provide adequate support to bring up four children. Singam had one brother and sister, both older, and a brother younger than he. Singam and the elder brother started doing small odd jobs from a young age and ended up doing labouring jobs to bring additional income to the family. Singam always wanted to have a prosperous life, but felt that this goal could not be achieved during his lifetime:

I felt inadequate and troubled. My relatives had *vītu valavu* and led a happy life. Throughout my life, I lived in a hut (*ōlai kuṭicai*) in somebody's *valavu*. I wanted to change that. *vītu valavu* unquestionably would give meaning to daily life.

He wanted to change the family situation and build a *vītu* for his parents. To provide this happiness Singam decided to leave the country:

I thought that by coming to Britain all my ambitions would be fulfilled. I wanted to send enough money to Sri Lanka, so that my parents could buy a *valavu* and build *vītu* and spend the rest of their life without any hardships.

He came to the UK in September 1990, but life in UK proved to be no better. He soon found that the other people in the house where he lived gave problems and he had to spend several days with his friend Vimalan in Hounslow:

Though I came to this country for a better future I felt that I had lost everything in my personal life (...)

This link between the devastation caused by war and the Tamil refugee experience may be a path to guide us to understand the meaning of the integrating function of *vītu valavu* in Tamil life in Sri Lanka. Singam further said:

The *vītu valavu* is an important aspect to me. I thought I could provide a *vītu valavu* for my parents in their old age. So they could die as respected people. I told you that people without a *vītu valavu* are not be respected in society. I wanted to build a *vītu*, but I felt that could not be fulfilled. Anyone can have a *vītu* in London, but that is not real *vītu*. *vītu* is like your family; it continues to give meaning to your life in society.

For Singam's parents to lead a happy life, they need a *vītu valavu*. For a Tamil *vītu valavu* is more than a dwelling place for eating and sleeping; it creates relationships, and it gives birth to culture. All the similar *vītu valavu* constitute similar substances and thus create the Tamil community (in Daniel's terms, "the person-house relationship"¹⁰⁰). Singam concludes:

vītu valavu should combine other experiences to provide complete happiness.

2.6.4 UNABLE TO DEAL WITH *vītu valavu* AS IN SRI LANKA

The other occasion when the topic of house and compound came up for discussion was their happy memories of Sri Lankan social gatherings. In their get-togethers, Tamils will gather in small groups to suit their age and relationship; men and women often gather separately, and then talk about a variety of subjects from private to public topics. Several groups trying to communicate at one time create a big noise in the house, but it does not bother anyone. All will enjoy several hours chatting and laughing. In addition, they tend to have some equipment to play Tamil music; often this is a tape recorder. At any functions, except funerals, Tamil music is played. If there are young people, then they enjoy *pailā* (Sri Lankan rap dance¹⁰¹) with *pailā* songs from Sri Lanka or Tamil film songs loudly played. This behaviour of Tamils has created countless problems with the white British people living in the neighbourhood. There are frequent incidents of neighbours calling to the police; and the police intervene to inform the family concerned that they must keep their noise volume to a minimum. This has prompted them to talk about *vītu valavu* in social gatherings in their

¹⁰⁰ Daniel, E. Valentine, *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way*. *op.cit.*, pp. 161-2.

¹⁰¹ Men and women will not touch each other's body in dancing. Touching each other's body shows lack of respect. A Tamil girl is not permitted to touch another man other than the family member before marriage. Several of my interviewees expressed vigorously and repeatedly their disgust for the moral laxity of the white British concerning pre-marital and extra-marital sexual relations. The older generation voices their concern for the loss of respect to the elders among the youngsters. The word *pailā* is a Portuguese in origin, meaning 'to dance'.

houses. The *vītu valavu* was under their complete control in Sri Lanka. They were able to do anything in their *vītu valavu*; no one would intervene to stop them doing as they pleased. But here, in Satha's words,

White people don't like noise and so we are unable to organise any functions.

The concept of *vītu valavu* first depicts the idea of shelter and sanctuary, "one's home is one's refuge, a place one runs to in times of danger"¹⁰² and second, creates the feeling of owning the space of one's life. A person "personally, socially and spiritually" feels "at peace"¹⁰³ within his *vītu valavu*. Although the Tamil word *vītu* literally refers to a house structure or a residential unit of a family, it contextually gives a different meaning to the Tamil refugees. Suthan could say that they had several coconut trees and mango trees "in our house in Jaffna." The Sri Lankan anthropologist Daniel explains this eloquently:

A house, to a Tamil, is more than just a structure built to the specifications of the owner. It is like all other forms of substance, in constant flux, mixing with and changing according to the substances that come in contact with it.¹⁰⁴

2.7 THE TEMPLE (*kōvil*)

When Singam said that "*vītu valavu* should combine other experiences to provide complete happiness", I asked him what did he mean by 'other experiences'? Singam continued:

The *vītu* is a material substance and a structure for the family to live in, but we need the *kōvil* (temple) for the proper functioning of the *vītu*.

Singam's words are not easy to understand or translate. What he means is that the *vītu* needs a support to strengthen, guard and protect it, not just as a physical structure, but as a social and spiritual entity that encloses and includes the family. The *vītu* is not just a building (*kaṭṭam*) as Thamotharam movingly explained in the previous pages. The *vītu* is a substance, a living organism, and like any other living organisms needs nurturing and

¹⁰² Daniel, E. V. & Thangaraj, Y., "Forms, Formations, and Transformations of the Tamil Refugee." *op.cit.*, p. 239.

¹⁰³ Holmes, W Robert, *Jaffna (Sri Lanka) 1980. op.cit.*, p. 54.

¹⁰⁴ Daniel, E. Valentine, *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way. op.cit.*, p. 109.

protection. In the mind of the Tamil refugees, the *vītu valavu* created an emotional relationship between the physical structure and the social community in a way similar to human attachments. In our conversations I was able to perceive a deep suffering for the loss of this relationship. They were emotionally moved when they talked about human losses in their villages; in a similar manner they cried when they talked about the loss of their *vītu valavu*. No insurance company can compensate for this loss.

Every aspect of purchasing a *valavu* to build a *vītu* has religious connotations and overtones. Some religious practices need the Hindu priest, others can be performed by the builder and the owner of the *valavu*. So, this *vītu*, this substance and relationship has to be protected by something larger than people; only then it can bring happiness and peace of mind to the people who are living in it. Singam continued:

The *kula-tēyvam* (family deity)¹⁰⁵ guards, protects and shields the village from every danger. A Tamil can live happily because the *kula-tēyvam* protects his *vītu valavu*.

He further explained that strict devotion and the accurate performance of all religious duties to the *kula-tēyvam* will deliver and endow devotees and the village with divine qualities. The *kōvil* has the authority over the village and its people, because it is the common place of worship; temple festivals show how they adore the deity that dwells in the *kōvil*¹⁰⁶; they also mark the seasons for sowing and harvesting and the calendar of events in the village. Every Tamil follows and practises the *kōvil* governance as part of his or her life, because the *kōvil* is not only for one individual but also for the entire village. Singam:

We are a people, but we can exist in harmony only when *kula-tēyvam* guard and protect the people.

Suriya, one of the interviewees, was able to experience the connection of the religious structural control only after he left the country and started his life in London. He said:

Hindu religious system is very strong in my village (...).

¹⁰⁵ *kulam* - family, or caste; *tēyvam* – deity/ god.

¹⁰⁶ See Sivathamby, K., *Sri Lankan Tamil Society and Politics. op.cit.*, p. 26.

The religious control in his village was very tight; no one would consider changing his/her religion, or at least Suriya has not seen religious change in his village, as we shall see further in Chapter 4:

I have not heard or seen people becoming Christian in my village.

He has not seen or heard any people from other religious traditions propagate their religious beliefs in the village. Swarnan, son of a Hindu priest, knows more about Tamil religious practices. He did not want to become a Hindu priest, but took part in rigid religious practices with his father. He shared his belief:

War can cause damage to people and property, but the *kaṭavul* (God) can continue the structural control of the community. The supernatural resides in the *kōvil* and structures the village in an order and gives meaning to life.

The presence of *kaṭavul* is felt in every aspect of Tamil village life. There are many kinds of *kōvil* ¹⁰⁷in every village: there are some important regional temples where devotees from surrounding villages flock for pilgrimage and celebration of festivals; then there are the local village temples around which the spiritual life of the village functions; and every household has a shrine inside the house where the household deities installed and honoured. There are very simple shrines erected in or under sacred trees, at the site of ponds, crossroads or rivers. Everything can be a vehicle for the divine, and so everything has to be sanctified to propitiate the local deities. The protection of the *kula-tēyvam* is invoked for every event that takes place in the village or in the individual, from sowing and fishing to passing a school examination, to obtain the blessings of *kula-tēyvam* and to create a harmonious functioning of individuals and families in the village. Swarnan explained:

An ancient proverb says, “Do not live in a village where there is no temple.” (*kōvil illāta ūril kuṭi iruka vēntām.*) Tamils can lead a meaningful life only when the *kula-tēyvam* and their forces operate in the events of the family and community.

¹⁰⁷ A survey conducted by the Department of Hinduism reported that there are 1,015 regional and village level temples counted in the North East District of Sri Lanka. (Mannar-28, Jaffna-459, Mulliaitheivu-29, Vavunia-55, Trincomalee-51, Batticaloa-315 and Amparai-78). See Sarma, C. Harihar, et.al., *ilaṅkai tiru nāṭṭin intu kōvilkal*. (Hindu Temples in Sri Lanka-Tamil). Colombo: Department of Hinduism, 1984.

The *kōvil* is a structure where the deities dwell, and worship (*pūcai*) is offered to them; it is the symbol and the instrument of God's presence among his people, 'God-among-us' (*Em-manu-el*). The presence of a temple denotes and celebrates God's presence in that place; correspondingly, the non-existence of a temple denotes and laments God's absence from that place. A place without a *kōvil* is a place without God, without life and light, a barren place, a place subject to the terrors of the dark and of chaos. The village life takes place around the temple activities, and every house is an extension of the central *kōvil*. It is not possible to understand the nature and function of the *kōvil* without constant reference to the family and the village; the temple knits together the many families of the village and turns the agglomeration of seemingly disorderly physical structures into a community that we call the *ūr*, the village.

2.8 THE VILLAGE (*ūr*)

In the above paragraphs we saw how people experienced the presence of the deities in and through the temple; the local *kōvil* is a sign and an instrument of divine presence among us; it is also an agent of the indirect social control of almost every aspect of people's lives and an instrument of unity of those who live in that village together to form a community. As the house is not only the physical structure, but includes the people who dwell therein, so also the temple is not only a physical structure built with some specific architectural determinations, but includes the deities who dwell therein, and the devotees who attend the temples for prayers, sacrifices and celebrations: the temple is at the same time the physical structure of buildings, compound and common well, plus the social reality of the worshippers that join in it, plus the supernatural sphere of the gods that dwell in it; the three spheres of relationships meet together in one single location, the *kōvil*.

While talking with my informants it became clear to me that house and temple are not two separate entities, but are part of an interwoven network of relationship to form the Tamil village community at large. Ratnam is a convert and a solicitor in London; as a church elder he exercises certain amount of authority in an All-Tamil Pentecostal Church in London. He feels and experiences that there is not the same feeling of *ūr* in London. According to him:

The social ranking a man has within society is judged by the place he occupies in the *ūr* functions. The vocation and the office¹⁰⁸ I held in the *kōvil* made the entire village respect me.¹⁰⁹

Ratnam's source of respect from others was based on his office in the *kōvil*. It is a two-way affair. People choose you for a temple committee because you are a reliable and respectable person, and then your office-bearing in the temple expresses and enhances your own respectability. His position in the temple committee and the role he played due to his office made him a known and respected person in the village. He explained that the temple created order in the functioning of the village by assigning different roles to different people, based on the caste system. In discussing Tamil Saivism, Dayanandan Francis says that in a Tamil village several families coexist, but the focus of the *ūr* is the temple.¹¹⁰ The entire village population comes together as one extended unit to participate¹¹¹ in temple festivals, and cultural performances are held by the community as part of the rituals.¹¹² Ratnam also expressed that this coming together as one family was like a prayer to the deities, that they may grant their families and the entire village success and prosperity. Nevertheless, according to Ratnam, the organisation of *kōvil* and the social order that it expresses and fosters in present times cannot be explained in clear terms; in order to understand it you have to experience it, to live it; it has to be

... experienced by living in the village and by feeling, moving, and existing in the *ūr mañ* (village soil) to know about, and understand the composition [of temple/village].

We may recall a similar expression of Thamotharam about the village soil. Thamotharam explained that he could experience the meaning of 'house' only by feeling and touching the soil of his own *valavu*. Now Ratnam said that "feeling, moving and existing" in the village

¹⁰⁸ The management of a non-private temple is normally in the hands of committee members of office-bearers. They are normally elected to their offices.

¹⁰⁹ Similar observations were noticeable in Ann-Belinda's study in Denmark and England. See Steen, Ann-Belinda, *Varieties of the Tamil Refugee Experience in Denmark and England. op.cit.*, p. 187.

¹¹⁰ Francis, Dayanandan T., *Tamil Saivism*. Madras: The Tamil Theological Book club, 1992, p. 93.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹¹² Maunaguru, S., *Īlattu Tamil Nāṭaka Araṅku. (Tamil)*. Thirunelvely, Sri Lanka: University of Jaffna, 1993, pp. 10-17.

soil makes one feel what it means to live in the village as a living cell of that social organism that is the *ūr*. These expressions give us a clue to understanding the meaning of village in the minds of the Tamil refugees. Meaning in Tamil life emerges out of living in the soil of the village. Tamil life, a life experienced by a Tamil on his village soil, cannot be experienced on another soil, because in an alien land there is no relationship between the person and the soil. Ratnam is now a Church leader, as he was also a member of the committee of his village temple; he is a respected and reliable person in his own right, and people have accepted and recognised his respectability by electing him as a leader of the local church. He holds a secular vocation as solicitor, vital to refugees in the same church; in his secular vocation he also renders a service to the community, so that in his life there is no clear-cut distinction between the sacred and the profane, the religious and the secular. But he is not entirely happy, although this gives him respect and high regard in the church. His complaint was that there is no social recognition in London; even other employees in his office never regard him as a person in charge, outside the office building. London may be like a gigantic village, but London life is not the life of an *ūr*; in London each one lives for his own, with little regard for the others. He continued to emphasise that without a proper hierarchical order society cannot function adequately. The hierarchical social order expressed in the ordering of life in the temple binds the people in the village together to create an *ūr* and a people in it. The *ūr* is a cosmos in itself; it is not a micro-cosmos if by that we understand a replica of a larger cosmos. As a cosmos, each village is unique and unrepeatable, related to others, but not absorbed by or dissolved in a larger unit. In the minds of Ratnam and many others, this order comes mainly from temple and temple festivals (*tiruvīlā*). According to Ratnam:

Most social events in the village coincide with religious festivals, and all *kōvil* Hindu religious festivals are social events. The *kōvil* is the very centre of the village and the cosmic mountain of the deities (*kula-tēyvam*) is usually the most visible part of the village.

This combination of the social and the religious structure, for Ratnam, is his real house, *ūr* that is one's real home. For Ratnam his village is the most integrated place with his life. He continued with emotional force:

When I am dead I would like to be buried in our *ūr* because it has the complete being of myself; the *ūr mañ* has my *vītu*, *valavu*, *kōvil*, history of my ancestors and everything in my life that can mingle with me directly and make my life worth living.

The functions of *kōvil* and *ūr* and his family and professional activities were combined as a single unit. Sathivel, who was deported to Sri Lanka while he was a believer in the Christian religion, though not yet baptised, could not separate the social and the religious functions in his village in Sri Lanka. While he was there, he proposed a marriage for his daughter. To arrange the marriage, he was asked to visit a Hindu priest and consult *pañcāṅkam*. I asked him “What is *pañcāṅkam*?” He could not explain it properly. He gave a roundabout answer: “it is a kind of ancestral pattern that exists” among Tamil people. After a thought he said;

pañcāṅkam is created by religious people and based on spoken and astrological calculation

I tried to understand the meaning of *pañcāṅkam* in order to understand what Sathivel was trying to tell me about his daughter’s wedding. I had recourse to written sources. Sivathamby explains this succinctly, “The *pañcāṅkam* gives the auspicious days and inauspicious days of all the social educational and economic activities.”¹¹³

Sathivel felt guilty for consulting *pañcāṅkam* as a person of Christian belief, but told me that he had to do it to fulfil the expectation of his family and people in the village. In the case of Singam *pañcāṅkam* does more than provide auspicious dates for family functions. For him *pañcāṅkam* is the binding of Tamil community, irrespective of their religious belief:

In Vaddukoddai, Hindus and Christians lived side by side. They had inter-marriages and *pañcāṅkam* played a big role in finding auspicious dates for marriages for Hindus and Christians. Hindus and Christians consulted *pañcāṅkam* about all the important events in their lives. Hindus became Christians to marry Christian partners. My brother changed his religion to marry a Christian woman, but that did not create any uneasiness in the village, because Hindus and Christians had the same set of rules for living. Hindus do not eat non-vegetarian food on Fridays, because they go to temple on that day. Similarly, Christians do not cook non-vegetarian food. I do not know why. May be out of respect for their fellow villagers. I did not see any difference between Hindus and Christians in my village. Some people went to temples and others went to churches.

The role of *pañcāṅkam* paved the way for human life in a village. It gave meaning to day to day life and provided its order. *pañcāṅkam* served as a guide to every person living in that village. In its origins *pañcāṅkam* perhaps combined Hindu religious practices together with

¹¹³ Sivathamby, K., *Sri Lankan Tamil Society and Politics. op.cit.*, pp. 36 & 37.

pre-Hindu astrological calculations, but many of these practices have become cultural practices not necessarily connected with Hindu religious practices. Many Sri Lankan Christians also seek *pañcāṅkam*, whether in counselling sessions, or in reading the Bible, or consulting oracles from different religious persuasions; some Christians (Anglicans, for example) refuse to contract marriage during the Lent season; Lent is not an auspicious season for marriage. Now we may call *pañcāṅkam* a trait of Tamil culture. Arul said:

We do not visit our friends on Thursday, we believe it's a bad day. May be there is a religious element to it, but it has become part of Tamil life. Tamils have accepted several religious practices as part of their life. Another example would be *poṭṭu* (round red/black mark on forehead). *poṭṭu* originated from Hindu religion, but now even Christians and Sinhalese girls place it on their forehead. *poṭṭu* is not a religious symbol anymore, it has become part of Tamil culture.¹¹⁴

In the usage of *pañcāṅkam* everything natural - the ordinary as well as the extraordinary - has a supernatural origin and explanation; and their visits to the *kōvil* provided the 'peace of mind' resulting from the knowledge that God has been propitiated and is now a propitious god, as they often put it. Why should they desert their deities? Desertion of the deities would be tantamount to a desertion of their families and of their very essence of being Tamil (the story of Hanna is exemplary in this respect, as we shall see in Chapters 3 and 4). *pañcāṅkam* plays an important role in the life of a Tamil, not directly or necessarily connected with the local *kōvil*. But still the *kōvil* plays an essential role in controlling the power balance in the village. The temple exists for the sake of the village, and so a village without a temple is not worth living in. Sivathamby states:

It is one of the most important institutions of the village. It reflects the hierarchy, the power-balance between the groups living within the village, and is an indicator to the type of social mobility that is taking place within the society.¹¹⁵

Therefore, changes within the society transpire only if this system collapses or ceases to function as an ordering pattern within the society.

¹¹⁴ The *poṭṭu* on the forehead was considered as 'the Third Eye,' the eye of the god Siva, to protect its bearer against evil eye and other dangers.

¹¹⁵ Sivathamby, K., *Sri Lankan Tamil Society and Politics. op.cit.* p. 37.

The social function of the *kōvil* is depicted through elaborated temple festivals (*tiruvilā*) celebrated, when the entire village is decorated,¹¹⁶ to participate in the festival. Ratnam:

We offered *pūcai* in a regional level *kōvil*; for that we made a special journey to be present there. But village level temples¹¹⁷ continued to play an important role in the village. Specially, *kōvil tiruvilā* became a complete village integration and gave all a sense of self worth.

Like Ratnam, Krishna, Sinathurai and Ganesh also shared that their lives too were influenced and guided by village temples.¹¹⁸ In Ratnam's case, the temple committee played an important role in organising the annual temple festival and special worship events connected to the temple.

The temple played a most important social function in every village.¹¹⁹ We have, then, two basic lines of communications and inter-relationships that constitute the social and cultural fabric of Sri Lankan Tamils in their *ūr*:¹²⁰ House/family – temple/village; the temple is the link between households and families in the vicinity, and by virtue of temple festivals, all the

¹¹⁶ Francis, Dayanandan T., *Tamil Saivism*. op.cit., p. 97.

¹¹⁷ Sivathamby divides village level temples into three categories, 1) temple with resident priests, big in structure; *pūcai* offered three times a day. 2) Temple with no resident priest, small in structure and worship *pūcai* offered on every Friday. 3) Worship spots under trees usually big, spreading ones, *pūcai* offered by the elder of a family and special worship *pūcai* is offered annually. This includes family deities worshipped within the compound in which the house stands. See Sivathamby, K., *Sri Lankan Tamil Society and Politics*. op.cit. pp. 29 - 33.

¹¹⁸ Sivathamby observes that the village temples would be the largest in number and at least 100 – 150 such places in each Tamil village. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹¹⁹ "Attendance at the festivals becomes a social event and adequate notice is taken of who wears what (Saris and jewellery). Those without enough jewellery would prefer not to go to the festival rather than go with a bare neck. Some borrow jewellery, some redeem the pawned jewellery in time to wear it on this occasion, and some of the generous pawnbrokers would loan the pawned article just for use during festival time. The annual festival time affords an opportunity for concerned people to meet and discuss problems connected with the village and the community. This is also the time for exploring possibilities of marriage, but no wedding ceremony takes place during the annual festival time." *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹²⁰ It should also be noted that there are three major divisions among Sri Lankan Tamils: Tamils who occupy the North of Sri Lanka – commonly known as *Jaffna Tamils*; Tamils who occupy the East of Sri Lanka – commonly known as *Batticaloa Tamils*; and the Tamils who occupy the Central hills of Sri Lanka – commonly known as Tamils from India or *Indian Tamils*.

households join together to form an *ūr*, a 'community of communities.' The temple with its thriving life is the link of union. Life outside the temple is a profane, inauspicious life; and a village without a temple is not a true *ūr*, but chaotic agglomerate of buildings, like London. We could say that solidarity in Tamil villages was like an ellipse with two centres of gravitation; the house/compound on the one hand and the village temple/festivals on the other. The two combined created a strong social force of "family centred" units¹²¹ in a Sri Lankan Tamil life.

This peculiarly harmonious network of relationships, with all its intricacies of meanings and nuances, is inherited and transmitted to the new members of society. This is the process of enculturation. In the process of transmission, some of the meanings change or are partially or totally forgotten; then new meanings are attached to older relationships; but the network remains. It is renewed in each generation, not worn out, torn or severely disrupted beyond recognition. This process of transmission, appropriation, adaptation to the new conditions in the common life and perpetuation of the specific meanings in the network of relationships we shall call 'enculturation,' not to be confused with the theological inculturation, the acculturation, or the socialisation of the sociological parlance.¹²² By the process of enculturation the newcomer to a given culture learns, appropriates, assimilates, conserves and transmits to future generations the skills for producing, distributing, preparing and consuming foodstuffs and other commodities, the values and counter-values in human relationships, the functions he/she is expected to execute, the place appointed to him/her to occupy, the role he/she is expected to play, and also the ways of relating to the deities of the family, of the village, and of society at large. Of a well-enculturated person it can be said that he/she is integrated into his/her culture, he/she has *kalāccāram*. However, Tamils violently uprooted from their village soil and transplanted into an alien soil, find it difficult to accommodate, to enculturate, to survive and live meaningfully in London.

¹²¹ Holmes, W Robert, *Jaffna (Sri Lanka) 1980. op.cit.*, p. 96.

¹²² Enculturation (very much like the process of socialisation): the process of learning and adopting one's culture. Inculturation: the process of incrusting the Gospel message into a culture without disturbing it significantly, by making the gospel a living part of that culture. Acculturation: the process of cultural change due to the interaction of two cultures co-existing in proximity. Socialisation (in standard sociological parlance): The process of incorporating new members into a given society (very much like the process of enculturation).

For Sri Lankan Tamil refugees *vītu*, *valavu* and *ūr* constituted one unity binding together many living people, and the living with the dead. For them the merely physical and geographical territory, changes in the structure of buildings, or even changes of life styles cannot determine the composition or essential nature of their *ūr*. Tamil life can continue to function only when their *vītu*, *valavu* and *ūr maṇ* remain the same, one could say like the pigmentation of their skin. The lament of Tamil refugees for the loss of their *ūr* is clearly elucidated in the poem of a Tamil refugee in London:

My wife would show
 Blasting bright light of a shell.
 And yet feed my child
 There!
 I was searching, searching,
 And tired of searching for stars
 Here!
 (...)
 When people greet me with a 'hello,'
 I do not experience love, affection or warmth.
 It's not like my *ūr*.¹²³

All in all, with their exodus to London, Tamil *kalāccāram* collapsed in the minds of the refugees and gave place to British *kalāccāram*, which Tamil refugees did not understand. Many Tamil refugees saw themselves as respected and civilised members in Sri Lanka, but not so in London. For example, Ganesh was a teacher; people saw in him a leader in Sri Lankan society, but found himself confused in London. He is working, like so many others, in a grocery store. Ganesh said that he was 'lost' in London. Fuglernd's study on Tamil refugees in Norway explained this discrepancy between the 'there' and 'here' even more clearly:

Tamil exile life is more than anything characterised by 'simultaneity', moving not from home/ past to exile/ future through a journey of time, but staying within a parallel time frame separated by distance and borders.¹²⁴

¹²³ Mullai Amuthan. In Thangathurai, Kokila (ed), *Puthinam* (Tamil) Vol.3, #10, p. 11.

¹²⁴ Fuglend, Oivind, *Between Nation and State: Aspects of Tamil Refugee – Migration from Sri Lanka to Norway*. op.cit., p. 130.

According to my understanding of the Tamil refugees, they did not feel that they were ignorant. Yet they expressed their inability to cope with the demands of a different life style and *kalāccāram* that was forced upon them. The following amusing example, related by Jeya, one of the refugees, would explain the confusion created by a different social and system:

When I was on my way to London, my travel agent kept us in Moscow for six weeks. He rented out a house in Moscow and twelve of us, boys and girls, stayed there. It is illegal for twelve people to stay in a two-room flat; we were told not to go out. Only two people went out everyday to buy foodstuffs for all of us. Only two people were allowed to take a bath per day, to avoid attracting the attention of the neighbours. The fourth day after our arrival, a boy went for a bath; in few minutes we found water oozing through the sitting room. All of us ran to the bathroom, to see that this boy had filled the bath tub with water, and was standing beside it, and pouring water on himself, as we take baths by the well in Sri Lanka.

The entire concept of life style has changed for them very quickly, even before they realised that they needed to change themselves. The contrast between the 'out here' and the 'back there' is dramatised by the case of Ratnam, the practising solicitor in London; "Peace of mind is not here." "Peace of mind" or "inner peace" summarises the feeling of happiness resulting from a good relationship with house, temple, and community of family, relatives and acquaintances who "mingled with us like one family." The opposite of this kind of peace is not war, but restlessness and insecurity. If Tamil refugees do not feel content in London, why did they leave their traditionally inhabited homeland in the first place? If London does not suit them, why did they come to London? And if they do not like it, why do they not leave it?

An analysis appeared in a Sri Lankan paper categorising Tamil refugees in other countries under three groups ¹²⁵:

- a) The victims: "Disappearances, torture, rape and extra-judicial killings in operational areas and harassment in Colombo has compelled Sri Lankan Tamils to seek security and peace in the West."

¹²⁵ Sivaram, D. & Tissanayagam, J. S., "Doors Slammed on Lankan Refugees" in *Midweek Mirror*. (A Sri Lankan weekly) Wed. 28 May 1997.

- b) The militants and supporters: Those involved in actions (e.g.: supporting the militants) that could be tried under Sri Lankan law.
- c) Economic opportunists: The quest for greener pastures.

These divisions are a distinction without a difference, as we have pointed out in Chapter 1 of this study. These distinctions do not make any difference to the self-understanding of Tamil refugees. All the Tamil refugees during the field study had come as fugitives, and shared the traumatic experiences faced by them before they sought asylum in London. In Fuglend's words: "their stories to us are often dominated by personal traumas and individual worries."¹²⁶ In the case of all the persons interviewed in London, when 'the problems' (war) came, order gave place to disorder, peacefulness gave place to restlessness, the familiar became strange, security became insecurity, life became the project of survival, and in many cases they have become refugees in their own country. This may not be true only of Sri Lanka, because the 1998 UNHCR statistics reported about twelve million world-wide refugee displacements in which Asian refugees five million.¹²⁷ The same report further stated that Sri Lankan refugees are spread across Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, Canada, Czech Republic, Romania, Russian Federation and India.¹²⁸

Every person had a unique story to relate about the problems in Sri Lanka. Stories shared by the refugees should be heard in order to understand the meaning of refugee experience.

2.9 TAMIL REFUGEE STORIES

2.9.1 "... RACIAL RIOTS AGAINST TAMILS HAVE STARTED" - SATHA

Satha was caught in the biggest racial riots ever perpetrated against the Tamil community on 24 July 1983. The following story by Satha illustrates the degree of hatred in mob violence:

¹²⁶ Fuglend, Oivind, *Between Nation and State: Aspects of Tamil Refugee – Migration from Sri Lanka to Norway*. op.cit. p. 127.

¹²⁷ UNHCR 1997 statistical overview at <http://www.unhcr.ch/refworld/refbib/refstat/1998/98tab02.html>

¹²⁸ See UNHCR, "Background Paper on Refugees and Asylum Seekers from Sri Lanka." Geneva: UNHCR, March 1997.

I think it was on 25th of July 1983, two days after the incident when thirteen army men had been killed in Jaffna; my Muslim friend Mohammed and I went to Kollpity. I didn't know that racial riots against Tamils had started in Colombo.

We saw a Tamil restaurant being looted and damaged by a group of people near the Kollpity junction. I saw a fire brigade vehicle coming and thought that they were going to put out the fire, but instead shouted they "hurrah!" and told the mob to destroy and burn the restaurant, and went away. I wanted to return to my room as soon as possible, but we didn't get any buses. At last we got into a crowded bus. The bus came up to Maradana and stopped.

I saw people running here and there. A mob stopped us and asked, "Are you a Tamil?" My friend said, "no, we are Muslims." They let us go.

I saw security personnel in trucks. They shouted at the mobs saying, "we will shoot! We will shoot!" but did not shoot.

My friend suggested that we move quickly, but I wanted to shout "*aiyō! aiyō!*" (Alas! Alas!), I cannot explain my feeling at that time: rage, anger, sorrow. It was a mixed feeling.

We got into a bus and went to Mattakuliya. The landlord took me to the Kotahena refugee camp. Then, in few days a ship took us to Jaffna. I cried inside the ship.

2.9.2 "... A PLACE THAT BROUGHT UNHAPPINESS." - GANESH

What happens when 'life and enjoyment' is removed from a person? Is the 'purpose' in life 'lost'? In one of the informal gatherings, Ganesh said:

My brother worked in Wattala, Colombo, as a doctor, but was killed in the 1983 ethnic riots. Some people told us that such an incident happened, but we did not receive any confirmation. My brother suddenly disappeared from our family. That was a shocking experience for all of us. He was 30 years old at the time. Moreover my brother's young wife came to our house with their one-year-old baby. (...) My parents were old, and this tragedy affected them badly, and my father died in the same year. (...) I could have managed with my teacher's salary but... [He stopped the conversation and looked at me] ... My brother's wife went to the market to buy vegetables and unexpectedly gun firing started between the army

[Sri Lankan soldiers] and 'the boys'¹²⁹ (*peṭiyankal*); she died in the cross firing...

Our entire family was ruined because of the war. Our family life became agony and filled with sorrow. Everyday I saw my mother crying in front of my brother's photograph. I could not stay in that house anymore. That was our grandparent's house, and every time I went inside I was sad...

Ganesh left because he did not see any happiness in the house. Swarnan left because he did not want his house to be destroyed by the problems.

2.9.3 "...WHO WOULD LOOK AFTER MY WIFE AND CHILDREN?"- SWARNAN

I was married with three daughters, eleven, ten and five years old. I was working as an office assistant in the government Agricultural Department, which was situated in the area controlled by the militants near Mannar Island, off mainland Sri Lanka.

The Department feared that the monthly salary to the staff would be robbed by the LTTE. So the Head Office in Colombo requested all the staff to go to the government military controlled Mannar Island to receive their salary. According to Swarnan, first, they would move to obtain permission from the militants to leave the area; second, they would have to travel few miles by the sea; third, they needed to obtain security clearance from the Sri Lankan army to enter the area. To perform these tasks he spent three or four days every month; the routine became an unbearable and dangerous burden for Swarnan. He said:

The Mannar main island was under the control of the army. Our head Office in Colombo refused to send our salary to my department, saying that there was no guarantee for money. They said that the LTTE (*iyakkam*) would rob the money and no one would take the responsibility. Therefore, all the employees went through hardship travelling from the *iyakkam* controlled area to the army controlled area every month. Many young people from my department went through severe harassment every month.

¹²⁹ The Tamil militant movement LTTE that fought against the government military was referred as the 'boys' or in Tamil *peṭiyankal* or 'movement' (*iyakkam*), by the Tamil refugees.

My wife's sister was an officer in the *iyakkam* and died in the Elephant Pass battle. *iyakkam* celebrated her death as martyrdom for the Tamil cause and the Sri Lankan army came to know about it. They also came to know that I am her brother-in-law. So, every time I went to Mannar the army harassed me saying that I was a spy for the *iyakkam*. I was not sure when I would be arrested as an *iyakkam* suspect. (...) If I were arrested, who would look after my wife and children? My sister's husband is a sick person. My other brother too was in the *iyakkam*, lost his leg in a battle and now lives as an invalid. I didn't have any other alternative, except to escape from this horror (*payankaram*).

He decided to leave the country. A travel agent requested £5,500.00 (Rs. 5,50,000.00) to arrange the trip. Swarnan did not have the money, so he borrowed from relatives and friends, left wife and daughters behind, reached London in 1994. He further stated about his life in Sri Lanka:

My salary was 2,700.00 rupees (£27.00) and we were able to save at least 300 rupees (£3.00) monthly under normal circumstances. We had a vegetable garden and poultry that gave us some money, but the war had escalated all the prices of essential items. I wouldn't have come to the UK if there were no war in Sri Lanka. We couldn't manage with my salary and, moreover, we were worried about my arrest at any time by the army. I have three girls and I need to save money to give them dowry. If I just sit and wait at home, who will look after my family? My children won't be able to find husbands in the future and everyone will blame me. (...)

I left the village in August 1993 and reached the UK in August 1994. (...)

We are here because we "did not have any alternatives," was a common expression from the lips of refugees over and over again. According to Swarnan:

I reached this country with lots of anxiety and fear. I did not know what was going to happen to me. I wasn't sure whether I would be allowed to enter the country. You know that Mannar area is one of the driest and hottest places in Sri Lanka. Just imagine coming from Mannar to a place with snow! I could not bear the climate. It was terrible. (...) But I did not have any alternative. (...) What to do? (...)

2.9.4 "YOU CANNOT LIVE FREELY IN YOUR HOUSE?"-VIMALAN

Vimalan was born in 1964 in a village in Jaffna area, predominantly occupied by fishermen. In 1984 one day, early in the morning, while he was going fishing with his father, a Sri Lankan navy patrol boat approached them and Vimalan was arrested as an LTTE suspect.

At one point I felt that I should join the militants and fight for the Tamil cause. I joined a militant group, did the military training, but half way through I felt uneasy about using violence to get freedom. So I left the movement within a few months and continued to work with my father...

I was taken to the Karainagar navy base. Some Navy personnel asked me whether I was in the movement. I said no, but they hit me with guns and sticks, saying that I was a liar. Then I was sent to another army camp in Kankesanthurai. They found out that I was innocent, and I was released in a few months. The beating was so severe that I could not keep my head in an upright position... My parents became frightened by this and kept me inside the house for several weeks like a prisoner. They did not even allow me to play in the compound. They told me that if the forces saw me they would arrest me again. Is life worth living if you cannot live freely in your own house?

He left Sri Lanka and went to France in 1984, and came to the UK in 1990.

2.9.5 “LIVING IN OUR HOUSE BECAME IMPOSSIBLE...”-KRISHNA

Krishna was a graduate teacher. He did B.Sc., specialising in Chemistry at Batticaloa University. At one point his house became unusable due to the military presence in his area. Krishna:

When ‘the problems’ started in June 1990, Kaluwanchchikudi was one of the very badly affected areas. Every morning shells were fired from the military ‘Central Camp’ towards our village. We were forced to run for our lives. My mother, sister and I lived in our house, but for one month we ran here and there, tried to settle down in different places. Living in our house became impossible, so we moved to a Roman Catholic church in Thettathivu. We lived there for a month, but even that area became dangerous. We were so desperate and frustrated, that one day we decided to go back to our house and were prepared to die in shooting or shellfire...

However, our house was on the main road, so we couldn’t sleep in the house at night. We would go and stay inside the village with someone and then come back to the house in the morning. Normally our mother would go first and see if there were any soldiers, and only then I would come out. If she saw any ‘problem’ she would come back, so that we would not go out.

This went on for several months; one-day Krishna came out of the house and was arrested by the soldiers. Krishna:

The soldier who arrested me inserted his gun barrel into my ear, rotated it into my ear and said, "Today is the last day for you." This went on for nearly one and half-hours... The captain went to a nearby house and asked about me. They confirmed that I was a schoolteacher, and only then they released me. The soldiers told me to go, but I was afraid, thinking that they were going to shoot at my back from behind... That was the day I decided that I should not stay in my village any longer.

2.9.6 "... I BECAME MORE FRIGHTENED"-SINGAM

Due to the war in Sri Lanka many temples were destroyed or damaged by heavy shelling from the military camps and air raids, and places of worship became defiled by the war. Singam:

I was a strongly religious person, but when I saw temples being destroyed I became more frightened.

My informants often said that temples were considered neutral places, and people used temples as shelters to avoid arrests and aerial bombing.¹³⁰ One remarkable fact that emerged out of the war situation was that people became more religious, and worship practices were enormously activated. Patricia Lawrence's study on the East of Sri Lanka devotes long pages to moving descriptions on how she observed a renewed religious intensity in the frontiers of human endurance; she stated and amply demonstrated that intense devotional acts "... have been urged into popular practice."¹³¹ Sivathamby pointed out a similar pattern in the north of Sri Lanka:

... Attendance at temple functions has increased because it provides a temporary release from the stresses and strains that have now become part of existence.¹³²

He further stated that people were afraid when "temples were damaged and became non-functional."¹³³ Their 'protection' was reduced to destruction and rubble. The deities that were

¹³⁰ Sivathamby, K., *Sri Lankan Tamil Society and Politics*. op.cit. p. 58.

¹³¹ Lawrence, B. Patricia, *Work of Oracles, Silence of Terror: Notes on the Injury of War in Eastern Sri Lanka*. op.cit., pp. 217-218.

¹³² Sivathamby, K., *Sri Lankan Tamil Society and Politics*. op.cit. p. 57.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p.57.

supposed to guard their village were destroyed in front of their eyes. They also feared that not worshipping family deities could make the situation worse.¹³⁴

The experiences of Satha, Ganesh, Swarnan, Vimalan, Krishna, and Singam clearly show that they could not base their life on the accepted norms of Tamil life. The familiar norms and values were no longer functional; now they were living under different circumstances, and their basic Tamil life was threatened; they found that their life became impossible in their own cultural context, because the context had been disintegrated. The story of the other interviewees is not so dramatic, but all of them suffered the horrors of living in a frantic fright. In his study on *Caste in Tamil Culture*¹³⁵ Pfaffenberger writes that “civilisation begins when the temples are built to control the sites.” In Tamil religious practice, the temple does “not create a divine space... but rather imposes order on a capricious theophany.” If the temples are destroyed, the order created by them returns to disorder and chaos.

These stories show the shattering and nerve-racking situation of the interviewees. Their symbols now have no meaning, their gods have no power, their temples are no longer the gravitational centres of life. On the one hand we see that the war has destroyed the ‘sanctuary’ aspect of Tamil houses and temples. On the other hand, it has also destroyed the family deities that offered them protection from every evil and gave them blessings. Were the Tamil gods powerless to protect their people and unwilling to bless them? Had the Tamil worshippers been left orphans of their gods? Will those gods have any power to protect and to bless their devotees in alien lands, where alien gods are worshipped?

2.10 THE TAMIL DIASPORA

Sri Lankan Tamils started leaving their motherland for other areas in huge numbers in the 1980s and 1990s as ‘refugees’. In this wave, not only educated *vēllāla* or high caste Tamils, but also the other Tamils shared the same experience, horrors, fears and aspirations for survival with dignity elsewhere than home. Piyadasa, a Sri Lankan writer, tells us about the Tamil exodus:

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹³⁵ Pfaffenberger, Bryan, *Caste in Tamil Culture: The Religious Foundations of Sudra Domination in Tamil Sri Lanka*. NY: Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University, 1982, pp.142-43. 1

In July and August (1983), the thoughts of a number of people, Tamils, Moors, Malays, Burghers and Sinhalese, as well as those who could not think of themselves as anything but just Sri Lankans, turned to the desirability of leaving Sri Lanka. The Tamils had many reasons, which are obvious. We allowed many of them prematurely to 'leave'... without even a funeral.¹³⁶

The news of hospitable policy and asylum offers for refugees in several Western countries spread like wildfire among Tamils, and inspired many young Tamils - torn as they were between different militant groups¹³⁷ and the Sri Lankan government forces - to escape and seek political asylum for themselves as well. Britain was considered a haven among Tamils, and they migrated with the hope that all their problems would be solved and their sorrows would end upon arrival at the house of their colonial mother.¹³⁸ However, they could not proceed to Britain just with an air ticket. They would have to pay huge amounts of money to 'travel agents'¹³⁹ to arrange the entire journey. Soon afterwards, when Sri Lankan Tamils were flooding into Britain and other countries, the host nations introduced stricter rules for admission and many of the Tamils became 'asylum seekers.' Sri Lankans Tamils had expected that they would be accepted immediately and receive political asylum. They also expected to enjoy the hospitality of British society through housing, living allowances, health care and schooling. Yet for many that was not the case.

2.11 CONCLUSION

Most of the interviewees said that the fact of leaving their homeland did not solve their problems, but created new unexpected problems in their daily lives. All of them were

¹³⁶ Piyadasa, L., *Sri Lanka: The Holocaust and After*. op.cit., p. 6.

¹³⁷ The situation is suitably summarised by D. H. Rajanayagam: "History was now finally taken out of the hands of scholars and academics and went into those of the militants on both sides. (...) One option after the other closed. Not only had history to justify the claim for independence, it also had to call the young men to battle and to prove ongoing Sinhala perfidy and untrustworthiness." Rajanayagam, D. H., 'The Politics of the Tamil Past' in Spencer, Jonathan (Ed.). *Sri Lanka. History and Roots of Conflict*. London: Routledge, 1990, pp. 116-117.

¹³⁸ De Fontgalland, S. G., *Sri Lankans in Exile*. Madras, India: Ceylon Refugees and Repatriates Organisation (CERRO), 1986, pp. 208-303. For statistical information on Sri Lankan asylum applications, see **Appendix III**.

¹³⁹ See the footnote no. 75 on 'travel agents' in Chapter 1.

explicit and concordant when they spoke of their integrated life in Sri Lanka. However, their explanations and viewpoints grew in drama till they reached peaks of intensity in their words and gestures and silences, when they referred to 'problems' that forced them to leave Sri Lanka. They were willing to give lengthy explanations about their past life and present life in London, but they said very few things about their transition from Sri Lanka to London. The explanation about their Diaspora occurred when the interviewees discussed specific news from Sri Lanka in their get-togethers, not so much in our individual interviews.

To some extent we have accompanied a number of people from their original bliss of their well integrated lives in their reasonably integrated culture, into the eventual horror of disintegrated lives in a disintegrating culture 'back home': From Integration to Disintegration. In the next chapter we invite the reader to accompany the same people in their journey from the horrors of disintegration into the terrors of *anomie*: From Disintegration to *Anomie*, the subject of the chapter ahead.

CHAPTER 3

FROM DISINTEGRATION TO ANOMIE

3.1 EXPLANATORY INTRODUCTION

We saw in the last chapter how the political upheaval prevalent in Sri Lanka impelled thousands of Tamils¹ to turn away from the homeland and their extended families into the unfamiliar shelter of strange lands as asylum seekers. Even though there is a gap of several years separating their present refugee life from the life they used to live in Sri Lanka, their memories of shock and trauma are still very vivid. From their conversations one gets the impression that their lives in London are suspended between insecurity and fear: insecurity about staying in their host country for much longer, and fear of going back to be witnesses – and very probably also victims - of the pervading violence in the North and East of Sri Lanka. In some cases the marks of violence are still fresh and bleeding, and some give the impression that they are suffering that personality disturbance called ‘post-traumatic syndrome.’² Thus Krishna says:

That was a terrible time in my village; several young boys were shot. If the soldiers got suspicious about a boy’s involvement with the tigers³, they just shot him. (...) And after some years of life in London, even if I hear the sound of a balloon blast, I am scared and look around.

Tamil refugees bring with them the memories of horror, and they know that it was precisely because of the horrors of the war that they were accepted in this new society and given

¹ See Appendix III for Statistical information of Sri Lankan asylum application in the UK

² To understand the trauma caused by torture the reader is invited to read ‘Vows, Torture and the Body,’ a subsection on a field study conducted in the eastern part of Sri Lanka. The author talks about torture experienced by her interviewees and the consequences on them. See Lawrence, B Patricia, *Work of Oracles, Silence of Terror: Notes on the Injury of War in Eastern Sri Lanka. op.cit.*, pp. 218-30. Parker Allison observed of ‘Post Traumatic Stress Disorder’ among Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in USA. See Parker, Alison L., *The Semiotics of “Home”: The Complexities of Life as a Sri Lankan in Exile*. BA Honours thesis presented to the Peace and Conflict Studies, California: University of California, 1993, pp. 74-6.

³ ‘Tigers’ is the abbreviation of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

temporary shelter, protection and acceptance. However, is London a shelter for them? They certainly are protected against racial riots in Sri Lanka: are they equally protected against the racial prejudice of the white population in London? Are they truly accepted, as the people they are, in this their new motherland? They feel that they have no safe shelter, no sure protection and no full acceptance in London, and this feeling provokes in them a reaction of frustration, anger and self-estrangement in different degrees;⁴ often the interviewees told me that they are aware that their presence is not wanted, that they do not belong, that they feel despised and rejected, and that at any moment they can be deported. In the Pentecostal communities it is common to hear every Sunday fervent prayers for those members whose cases had been rejected and also petitions for a visa extension.

The hostile graffiti found on walls, public toilets, elevators and so forth ordering them “Pakis go home!” plus the remarks in the most offensive abusive language often thrown against the Tamil presence in London are like spit on their faces.⁵ There is little they can do, because “even the police look elsewhere when Tamil refugees are being victimised” (Ratnam). Besides, the British government’s continually changing asylum policies, introducing tighter

⁴ It is not surprising to find a similar description about Tamil refugees in Canada, written by a Sri Lankan psychiatrist: “First, at the height of the communal riots [July, 1983], the Eelam Tamils went through a state of numbness that is being in a shock unable to feel pain, in short unable to explain what is going on around them. This state was followed by a state of elation that is they are happy to be alive. This state lasted for a short period. They soon realised the extent of their loss in terms of lives, properties and the demeaning treatment given to them by the majority population. This will lead them to a state of anger in which they will show their anger towards the government and the law enforcing bodies who failed to protect them. Some anger was directed against their own leaders for misleading them to believe that they can live in peace with the majority community.” Dr. Selvakone, G. M., “*Psychosocial Changes Faced by the Eelam Tamils In Canada (Its Possible Solutions)*,” an unpublished paper, 1998, p. 5.

⁵ While these pages were written, the writer was walking back home at 11.30 p.m. on 7 June 1999, when two white youngsters shouted at him “You f... g bastard, go home!” Then they threw bottles aiming at the writer’s head with still more abusive language. A study conducted by the Home Office on racial violence in the UK said: “The politics of immigration and media coverage of immigration issues also appear to have influenced racist sentiment and racist violence among people who choose to see ‘immigrants’ as the source of their own problems.” Sibbitt, Rac., *The Perpetrators of racial harassment and racial violence*. (Home Office Research Study 176) London: Home Office Research and Statistics Directorate, 1997, p. 13.

measures against accepting any more refugees⁶ and deporting a good number of them are frequent discussions in newspapers and television channels. For the British population, the refugees pose a problem and are a problem to them (Vimalan), not just people who came with a problem. If they accept the mass media alarmist programmes uncritically, British people will come to the conclusion that their government tried to solve the problems of the refugees and, by doing so, introduced a new problem to the white British population. Ratnam reflected with sadness: "Now they want a united Europe; perhaps they mean a united white Europe." Tamil refugees just do not understand. After the horror and trauma of disintegration of their houses and families and villages and their corresponding exile, now they need permission from the authorities to live, to exist, and to be. If they do not have that permanent or temporary permission, they are no longer refugees and have become transients and even fugitives from the law of the country that offered them 'refuge', wandering from place to place, from country to country, from one detention centre to another detention centre; the mere survival has become their main goal in life.⁷ To achieve this goal, all means are legitimate in their view, but even so they live a "dog's life" (Hanna), without seeming meaning or purpose.

⁶ The Refugee council report argued that the new asylum system in the UK is "an inefficient and unfair decision-making system." See *Briefing on the Government's new Immigration & Asylum Bill*. London: Refugee Council, March 1999. See also *Immigration and Asylum Bill. (Bill 42)* London: The Stationary Office, 9 February 1999.

⁷ From 1988 to 1997 -191 principal Sri Lankan applicants have received asylum status in the UK. See Appendix III.

3.2 A DOG'S LIFE (*nāy cīviyam*)⁸ – HANNA

I met Hanna at a Tamil Church. A church leader introduced her to me, remarking that she had been a very fervent Hindu, that her heart had been touched by the Christian message, and that she was now a baptised member of the church. Hanna was shy in my presence, as were most Tamil women; they would not talk with men - especially strangers - except in the presence of their parents, family members or their elders. Hanna was a newly baptised Christian, a girl of marriageable age, good-looking and attractive; her two elder sisters were searching for a suitable young man to make an arranged marriage for her. She looked embarrassed. I felt that I had to start the conversation. I introduced myself and asked the usual question, as someone makes a remark about the weather to break the ice: "How's life in London?" Her abrupt reply opened for me a new avenue of exploration on the life of Sri Lankan refugees in Western countries:

Me: How is your life in London?

Hanna: What is this life? This life is a dog's life! (*itenna cīviyam, itu nāy cīviyam*)

Her reply seemed abrupt and even slightly improper. That is not the answer to expect to a greeting, that she was living like a dog in London. I could detect bitterness, anger and frustration in her words and her eyes. Though she appeared content in her new social and religious atmosphere and spoke in highly positive terms about Christianity, her reply made me feel that she had some grievances about her social life (family) and/or religious life (church) in London; later I realised that she has only a small circle to move around. So I persisted:

⁸ Village dogs have no value or evident purpose in Tamil life. No worth at all. They live because they are alive, without any acknowledgement of their presence. They move around without knowing any destination. If you allow some of them to sleep in the compound around your house (they never sleep inside the house), they will gratefully bark at any strange noise, movement or person; they alert the household of the presence of some possible danger. You see them wandering around market places, dump sites, eating-places, butcher houses, looking for scraps of food. They are good scavengers. Wherever you see a village, you will see many dogs. Whenever you see a dog, you know that there is a village thereby. A Tamil woman in London discourses on dog's life in an informal conversation like this: "Lack of food and poor living conditions have made their bodies look ugly. Vendors and people chase them away, throw stones and sticks at them, sometimes they beat them; but dogs do not mind; they go away and come back again to the same place, because they need food and a place to sleep."

Me: Why do you say that your life here is a *nāy cīviyam*?

Hanna: There is no peace in my mind here (...) No peace, happiness, culture, climate or language available for me in this country (...) As a Hindu I spent time in temples, and wanted to do the same here; but that was denied to me. (...) I was busy in Sri Lanka, and had friends and relatives; even that has been refused to me here.

In this verbal outburst that we have shortened, we immediately identify several ‘generative words’⁹ often repeated with equal emotion by other interviewees: peace, happiness, culture, climate, language, family, friends, relatives, etc. Her life in Sri Lanka was filled with life; in London her life seems filled with the void, an empty life, the life of a dog. It is true that, comparatively speaking, her standard of living in London was higher than in Sri Lanka, but the quality of life, if we give credit to her words, was at the lowest ebb. According to her, the standard of living has to do with material things, the quality of her life has to do with things spiritual; they may not be in opposition all the time, but they must not be confused, either. I wanted to pursue with explanations on *nāy cīviyam*. I thought we were in an impasse. A respectable looking lady in her early seventies came to our rescue (she was listening to our conversation, nothing unheard of in Sri Lanka!):

A dog’s life means a meaningless life (*nāy cīviyam enṛāl karuttillāta cīviyam*). The dog is a menial, servile animal in Tamil life in Sri Lanka. People own dogs not as pets, but mostly as watchdogs. Very few middle class people own highly bred dogs; in general people own village dogs. They are small in size, but easily adaptable to hard living conditions. So, dogs are not looked after; instead they are allowed to wander around and eat leftovers from the households.

After a long interval of separation, the lady took me aside and explained something she had forgotten to say, to conclude with a reproach:

⁹I borrow this expression from Paulo Freire. The method of using ‘generative words’ was introduced and developed by the Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire in his ‘educational base communities’ for his literacy campaigns for the peasants in the huge cities of Brazil. We can discover the ‘generative words’ of a community and so ‘read their world’ by listening carefully and observing the words they use most often and with the strong intensity of feeling; those words will reveal their deepest longings, frustrations and aspirations. See Freire, Paulo, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. NY: Seabury Press, 1968, pp. 75-118. Also Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*. NY: Continuum, 1981; Freire, P. & Macedo, Donaldo, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*. South Hadly, Mas: Bergin & Garvey. 1987

There are several ways how dog (*nāy*) is used in casual conversation. When you are angry and want to insult someone, you call him *nāyyē* ("you, dog!"). If your food is not good or tasty, you say *nāy tinṇā cāppātu* ("not even a dog would eat this"). This phrase is very strong for a young woman to use in her first conversation. Maybe she feels lonely or unlucky in her life. I wouldn't say that to a stranger!

Saro is a mother in her early fifties. After overcoming severe difficulties, she came to London to live with her two young children (a girl in her early twenties and a boy in his late teens), in the hope of having a happy life thereafter. Like Hanna, she can now enjoy a higher standard of living, but her expressions indicate that she has found a very low quality of life:

My life in London is like the life of a wandering dog (*nāy alaiccal*). I have no meaning or purpose being in this country. I do not know what to do. Whenever I go out, I go out for the sake of going out. I have become dependent on others, a parasite (*oṭṭuṇṇi*). I can't drive a car, which means that I can't go out. In Sri Lanka I was able to visit my friends and relatives, but here I stay inside the house the 24 hours of the day, moving within the house without any purpose. We don't even have a garden (*valavu*) to do things in it. This is a life of a wandering dog (*nāy alaiccal*). Have you seen village dogs (*ūr nāykal*) just running around the house without any purpose? I am like that.

And this is the sad portrait - accurate and elegant in its few strokes - written by one of the foremost writers on Jaffna, W. Robert Holmes:

The quality of village dogs has not improved a hair in the past two decades. Miserable, mangy refugees from the happy hunting grounds, they skulk around, apparently enduring a joyless, painful, half-starved existence; only showing signs of life when threatened by their own kind with the possibility of ending it. Only crows, cats and small rodents show them respect. Those that range the lanes and roads and slink about wherever humans gather, particularly at public functions where they vie with crows for crumbs and crusts, have neither personal appearance nor charm of personality to appeal to the viewer.¹⁰

For some time I wondered whether I could find a single term or expression that could encompass the many terms Tamil refugees use to express the disillusion and misery they found very soon in London, after their dreams and initial sense of relief and elation at

¹⁰ Holmes, W Robert, *Jaffna (Sri Lanka) 1980. op.cit.*, pp. 67-8.

reaching their intended destination had subsided. Finally I thought that the striking Tamil expression “a dog’s life” (*nāy cīviyam*), repeated quite often in conversations as a passing reflection, and with the utmost intensity by two women, Hanna and Saro, was a very graphic and accurate expression. In my search for an equally appropriate and more respectable term for translating *nāy cīviyam* I came across the word *anomie*.¹¹ They live a life of *nāy cīviyam*, a life in a prolonged state of *anomie*.

In a flash thousands of Sri Lankan Tamils have made the transition from a pre-industrial society to a post-industrial mass culture, from a pre-modern environment of rural landscapes to a post-modern environment of skyscrapers. This has shattered their ancestral family life. They feel suffocated and dizzy in the trepidating rhythm of the modern Western city. The word *anomie* was introduced into the vocabulary of the social sciences by the French sociologist Emile Durkheim in his study on Suicide,¹² and also in his previous book on *Division of Labour in Society*¹³ precisely to explain what happened to the peasant masses that had to abandon their ancestral rural villages and settle in the newly grown industrial cities

¹¹ For the debated concept of *anomie*, its development and applications see Orru, Marco, *Anomie: history and meanings*. Boston & London: Allen & Unwin, 1987 and Passas, Nikos, *Merton’s Theory of Anomie and Deviance: an elaboration*. (Ph.D. Thesis), University of Edinburgh, 1989. A good summary of the concept’s development and a classified bibliography can be found in Clinard, Marshall Barron (ed.), *Anomie and Deviant Behaviour: a discussion and critique*. New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964. A recent assessment can be found in Passas, Nikos & Agnew, Rogert (eds.), *The Future of Anomie Theory*. Boston: Northwestern University Press, 1997.

¹² See Durkheim, Emile. [Spaulding J. A. (tr.)], *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. New York: Free Press. 1951, pp. 241-76. Durkheim’s data analysis on suicide was heavily criticised by Stark & Bainbridge, but this research does not use his analyses in any form. See “Durkheim’s *Suicide*: An Inquest” in Stark, Rodney & Bainbridge, William S., *Religion, Deviance and Social Control*. NY & London: Routledge, 1996, pp. 31-51.

¹³ Durkheim, Emile, (translated by W. D. Halls), *The Division of Labour in Society* Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984.

during the industrial revolution in Europe. The term comes from the Greek *nomos*¹⁴ with a negative prefix: *a-nomos*, “absence of *nomos*.” The *nomos* of a society is the ordering principle that gives the network of relations among its members a commonly accepted meaning and purpose for living together. This *nomos* can be shattered by catastrophic events that severely unbalance the coherence of the social whole; when this happens, that society falls then into a state of *anomie* or *anomic* state.¹⁵ One of the most dissolving forces that destroy the *nomos* of a society is the state of war, and very specially the state of prolonged civil war of one segment of society against the other. We could safely say that the general state of civil strife of a society is equivalent to a general state of *anomie* in that society. In a general context, the American sociologist Levin expressed this very clearly:

Suddenly the rules that regulated daily life are thrown into turmoil, and the resulting confusion about how to act is called *anomie*, or the state of normlessness.¹⁶

The values and norms by which people had ruled their lives are no longer viable for life, and people have to devise schemes to cope with the new unexpected reality. One instance of this dramatic and sudden transition from a normal state (state with norms) to an abnormal state (state without norms) was the industrial revolution in the West, which is the background of Durkheim’s study. Another instance was the conquest and subjugation and domination of the South (Africa), the East (Asia and the Pacific) and the Far-West (America) by Western

¹⁴ The *nomos* of the universe is that principle that gives the multiplicity of elements their inner connection, their coherence and meaning for the whole. In a similar way, the *nomos* of a society is that ordering principle that turns the mere aggregation of individuals into a congregation of persons with a common purpose for life together. With *nomos*, the group of individuals becomes an organised society of persons; without *nomos*, a previously organised society turns into a group or a human mass, even as human horde; then society falls into what in Sri Lanka we call mob rule. In Greek thought the concept of *nomos* comes within a context of other equally important concepts, often complementary to each other. *Cosmos* is the ordered universe; *chaos* is the undifferentiated disorderly universe; *nomos* is the ordering principle of things; without *nomos*, *cosmos* falls back into *chaos*, and loses its essential meaning. *Nomos* is the outward expression of the *logos* or inner nature of things or society. See entry “Physis and Nomos” in Edwards, Paul, (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Vol. Six). London: The Macmillon Company and The Free Press, 1967. See also Chapter 2: “Components of Meaning in Nomos as used by Paul” in Winger, Michael, *By What Law?: The meaning of Nomos in the Letters of Paul*. Georgia: Scholars Press, 1992.

¹⁵ Levin, William C., *Sociological Ideas - Concepts and Applications*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, [1984] 1988, p. 300.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

powers (Spain, Portugal, England, Holland). Another instance of destruction of the familiar ordered universe and the fall into a state of no-norms is, we emphatically repeat, the present prolonged ethnic war in Sri Lanka.¹⁷

The destruction of the cosmos and descent into chaos in societies has some effects on individuals and groups; they fall into a state of shock, numbness and utter confusion, which Durkheim calls “*anomie*.” According to him, one of the possible consequences of the state of *anomie* is the suicide of many, a refusal to cope with the new reality in desperation. This fact, discovered by Emile Durkheim in the 19th Century, is now widely recognised as one acute problem of planetary dimensions. The total transformation and even destruction of traditional cultural patterns may be the result of the sudden introduction of modern technology, with the corresponding destructive results of a state of *anomie* in entire cultures.¹⁸ Levin gave a most comprehensive definition of *anomie* in these terms:

A condition of social ambiguity in which an individual does not know how to act because the rules of behaviour (norms) are either unclear, entirely absent, or in some way unsatisfactory.¹⁹

In this definition the ambiguity of not knowing the norms for relating with others is not only a transitory state of *anomie*, but also a prolonged state, or even a permanent condition. Levin applies his definition to ‘individuals’; in this study we extend it also to groups. This prolonged state of confusion that is so prevalent among Sri Lankan refugees is

¹⁷For the study of ethnic conflict in a global perspective, see Horowitz, Donald L., *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. London: University of California Press, 1985.

¹⁸ An example of that is the project of the UNESCO’s World Federation for Mental Health to balance technological transformation of the modes of production in the developing societies with a healthy mental development of their components. The UNESCO prepared a manual under the title *Cultural Patterns and Technical Change* under the direction and editorship of the cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead. The insight underlying the entire project was that rapid technical development led to rapid social change, and that entire populations could not cope with such a change and consequently would fall under the condition that Durkheim and others would call “anomic state.” See Mead, Margaret (ed.), *Cultural Patterns and Technical Change*. (A Manual prepared by the World Federation for Mental Health), NY: The New American Library of World Literature, Inc., 1961 (6th printing).

¹⁹ Levin, William C., *Sociological Ideas - Concepts and Applications*. *op.cit.*, p. 299. Further assessment of *anomie* can be found in Merton, Robert K.. *Social Theory and Social Structure*. 2nd ed. New York: Free Press [1949] 1968.

understandable only when we let the refugees express their own living conditions in exile. Then they will tell us stories of their distress in London in their own words. That will help us to perceive the refugee life as the refugees perceive it themselves. Though we try not to give the impression of dividing the refugee experience into categories, because the refugee life is an inseparable and indissoluble whole, when we describe it under different modalities of experience, it is for the sake of analysis. In any case the generative words in the lips of my interviewees usually come together, without any specific order or sequence.

3.3 “THE WANDERING TAMIL”

The case of Sathivel, though not typical of all, is symptomatic of the restlessness and insecurity of life in exile, a life not worth living, “a dog’s life,” at the mercy of decisions made by others for no apparent reasons. We offer here an abridged narrative in Sathivel’s own words:

From Sri Lanka to Sweden:

Soon after the Elephant Pass battle in 1992, I left Sri Lanka and went to Sweden. The Swedish authorities rejected my asylum application in June 1993. There were several cases of Sri Lankans rejected along with mine. They kept us in a detention camp till the deportation orders were completed. We were terribly frightened and sad about the decision. We knew that once we got back, we would end up in one of the Colombo prisons. The Sri Lankan government was arresting all the Tamils deported from other countries, for interrogation. I had heard that many of them have ended up in indefinite imprisonment. (...) So all the inmates in the detention camp got together and made a big protest to the Swedish authorities. One held in custody poured petrol on his body and set fire to himself. (...) That did not solve the problem. (...)

From Sweden to Norway:

I managed to escape to Norway in April 1994. I changed my name because I was afraid that the Norwegian authorities would discover my identity. If they found out that I had lived in Sweden for some time, they would immediately send me back to Sweden. (...) My new life in Norway did not last long. The Norwegian authorities too rejected my case.

The stigma of Criminality:

I was arrested and taken to the police station. I was told that they were going to deport me to Sri Lanka. They also informed me that changing one's name is a criminal offence. Also I was informed that they had found out my previous stay in Sweden as a refugee. (...) They also said that I would be locked in the remand prison until a decision was made on my case. They took photographs of me and ordered me to wear the prisoners' uniform.

“From the depths I cry out to you, Lord” (Ps. 130:1):

I was wearing a small cross in my neck chain. I had to remove that as well. I was not a Christian at that time, but I had the feeling that the cross was a protective symbol, and I had been wearing it for a long time. Though I was a Hindu, belief in Jesus was not a problem. The Hindu religion is like an ocean that can absorb different religions in its fold. I have seen this practice [of cross wearing] among many Hindus. (...) Even the LTTE cadres wear crosses in their neck chain. They may not be Christians, but they believe that the cross is a protective symbol. While in Norway, I had also been to a few Christian churches to pray, and the cross in my neck chain was a meaningful symbol to me. (...) Just before removing the chain, I held the cross and said, **Jesus! If you are a living God, save me from this trouble. I do not want to go back to Sri Lanka!** I just prayed without knowing any implications about Christian prayer.

Utter Degradation:

I was kept in a prison cell without light. Every hour someone would come and, with the help of torchlight, looked at what I was doing. The prison cell looked like an animal cage in the zoo. I started crying and prayed throughout the night. At about 3 o'clock in the morning a policeman came, opened the prison cell, and told me: “We have decided not to deport you to Sri Lanka. We have received a message from the Swedish authorities saying that they are willing to accept you.” It was a shock to me! Several others who had been arrested along with me had been deported or were still in prison; but I was taken out of the prison cell. I could not believe my eyes! (...)

“Not a word from their lips can be trusted” (Ps.5.9):

The Norwegian police took me and handed me to the Swedish police. The Swedish police asked me why I had left the country. I told them that I did not want to go back to Sri Lanka. They said that they could not make decisions about me now, and that I had to wait until a decision was made.

Just imagine my situation! I thought that I was going to be accepted by the Swedish government [as I had been told in Norway] but now they were telling me that I had to wait for a decision. Later I was sent to the refugee camp where I had stayed earlier. (...) I lived in Sweden for six months, but in Sweden refugees are not allowed to work.

Escape to Denmark and Deportation back to Sweden:

Again I left Sweden and this time went to Denmark to find employment. I was arrested by the Danish police and handed over to the Swedish authorities. (...)

Dislodged to Sri Lanka:

In the meantime in Sri Lanka there was a peace accord between the government and the LTTE in the later part of 1994. At this point the Swedish government deported many of us to Sri Lanka. I reached Sri Lanka in June 1995. (...)

From Sri Lanka to London:

I started again on my carpentry work in Jaffna. (...) At that time the security forces killed my sister-in-law's husband. (...) My brother-in-law, who was living in the United Kingdom, was willing to pay money to a travel agent and sponsor my sister-in-law's eldest son to travel to the UK. They wrote to me asking for my assistance to bring him to Colombo, because of the security risks involved for a young person to travel alone. So the two of us travelled to Colombo and, while we were there, my brother-in-law told me over the phone that he was willing to give me a loan to pay the travel agent. (...) Although I had no plans to go abroad again, I decided to give another try. I agreed to the proposal, paid the money and landed in the UK on the 22 of November 1996. (...)

His life started once again in a new country, the UK. Sathivel testified: "I felt that I was hounded down like an animal." The condition of being a fugitive rather than refugee forced him to a separation from the whole of reality; the supreme value of his life was just to keep alive, a refugee from Sri Lanka and a fugitive from three Scandinavian countries. The experience of restlessness, fear and rejection developed in him an acute anomic condition. Yet he is trying to break this situation by taking the new emerging reality courageously upon himself and enter the new social order to save what was left of his human dignity. According to him, his daily life did not provide an answer to his struggle; but his first traumatic experience, regarding his deportation to Sri Lanka, "providentially" (in his own words)

created faith in Jesus. His Tamil culture and religion did not provide any meaning or purpose to Sathivel's life; and the present British culture in which he found himself immersed could not give any meaningful content to his life. He was tossed by invisible and incomprehensible political powers from one country to another, from one location to another, with nothing to look forward to, except the preservation of his life; and even this preservation was in the hands of others. Sathivel is one of many who were forced to exist with new ideas and values, but "their social points of reference are elsewhere."²⁰ Once you have been uprooted from the soil, any location is good enough if it provides a shelter for survival in the storm. Yet the traumatic fact is that many refugees experience a mere "bodily experience of external existence,"²¹ a mere biological existence, not a social or culturally meaningful existence. They do not know where they are heading until they reach a specific Western country and precariously settle in it. The researcher finds many stories of Tamil refugees stranded in remote countries, in Moscow as well as other countries in Eastern Europe and even in Africa, without even knowing the name of the country of their arrival, in their attempt to devise circuitous ways to reach the Western European countries. Satha told the following story, with jovial humour:

About five years ago, one day I received a telephone call from a shop owner in my village. Someone from Heathrow Airport telephoned, asking me to come to identify this man and release him from the immigration authorities. I went there immediately and helped him. As soon as we came out of the airport he said, "Brother! Your father told me that you were living in London; how come that you are in Germany? (*tampi! appā conṇār nīr London ilai irukirīr enru, nīr eppaṭi Germany ilai irukirīr?*) I said, "This is London" (*itu London*). Then the fellow said, "My agent told me that they were taking me to Germany. I do not know what happened; it looks like they have put me on a London flight" (*tampi! enrai agent conṇār ennai Germany kku koṇṭu pōrateṇṭu, enna naṭantu tenru teriyātu, ennai London flight ilai pōṭṭiṭṭāṅka!*).

This experience of living an unstable and transient existence ("my home is the road") impels them to improvise norms and rules that are valid "for the time being." This experience

²⁰ Further, Fuglend's study among refugees in Norway showed that many refugees are leading "very lonely life" and their social interaction and relationships "rarely develop beyond a certain level." Fuglend, Ovind, *Between Nation and State: Aspect of Tamil Refugee – Migration from Sri Lanka to Norway*. op.cit., p. 130.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

reveals and reinforces an acute anomic condition that, among other ill effects, separates the refugee from the whole surrounding reality. Durkheim very appropriately said:

All man's pleasure in acting, moving and exerting himself implies the sense that his efforts are not in vain and that by walking he has advanced. However, one does not advance when one walks toward no goal, or which is the same thing - when his goal is infinity.²²

3.4 THE SENSE OF LOSTNESS

If Sathivel was 'the Wandering Tamil' in the Scandinavian countries, Ganesh could also be called 'the Wandering Tamil' in the streets of London. Both Sathivel and Ganesh (as well as Singam) had the most acute experience of 'unwantedness.' Ganesh had been a respected schoolteacher, held in high esteem in his own and surrounding villages, as most teachers are in Sri Lanka. In London he contracted a pre-arranged marriage with a Tamil Sri Lankan woman well established with her hospital job, her house and two children of a previous marriage. This marriage broke down; Ganesh felt unwanted in his own new family, not respected by his step-children, and consequently developed a low self-esteem; his hopes of forming a family were shattered. Eventually he joined one of the Christian communities. After relating how he joined a Christian community where he was wanted and accepted, and how there he recovered his own identity, dignity and self-esteem, he concludes in a flashback:

Ganesh: I was lost... utterly lost.

Me: Lost? Where?

Ganesh: I was just lost. In the asphalt jungle. When I left home one day... I determined not to step back into the house again. I was walking along the streets; even at 12 midnight I was on the streets. (...) Most of the people who have found Christ tell me the same story.

In Tamil experience one may feel lost in the immensity of the ocean or lost in the complexity of the jungle. Hence the two Tamil expressions "lost in the ocean" (*kaṭalkkai vṭṭa mātiri*) and "lost in the jungle" (*kāṭukkai vṭṭa mātiri*); the Biblical "wandering on the earth," (Genesis 4: 12) in the Tamil imagination is usually pictured as "wandering in the jungle."

²² Durkheim, Emile. [Spaulding J. A. (tr.)], *Suicide: A Study in Sociology. op.cit.*, p. 248.

Singam was so overwhelmed by his sense of lostness, confusion, meaningless and lack of peace within himself, that he too felt “lost in a big ocean.” Singam:

The first thing I felt in this country was that I was on my own. I felt that I was left in a gloomy place, alone in the midst of the ocean, without help from anyone. It was such a scaring and disheartening experience for me. Though I had come to this country for a better future, I felt that I had lost everything in my personal life. (...) I personally was feeling lostness in my life. (...) I was totally confused in my life. Sometimes when travelling in a bus I forgot where I should get off and went elsewhere. On my own I started crying for no specific reasons. I even began thinking that I would not live, but kill myself by jumping in front of a train or a bus. (...) A few times I lost control of myself and went straight into vehicles to kill myself...

Singam, Vimalan and others, explicitly or implicitly, feel lost in the jungle, with no house/compound/fence where they can have solace, protection and security, with no centre of reference. In the jungle one is threatened by an infinite number of invisible foes²³ that are lurking to attack you; hence the sense of insecurity and fear. Both experiences are usually mentioned in connection with loneliness and isolation.

3.5 LONELINESS - ISOLATION

Tamil refugees often uttered the word ‘lostness’ in connection with the word ‘loneliness’; in fact, in the Tamil language, the words for ‘lostness’ (*taṇiya*) and ‘loneliness’ (*taṇimai*) come from the same root and are related to each other like, ‘lonely’ and ‘alone’ in English. In the Tamil language in general, and among refugees specially, one often hears the expressions “I feel lonely” and “I feel lost” closely related as a conceptual and experiential unit; the refugees often associated loneliness with isolation, and isolation with ‘incommunicado’; hence the need of a friend or a relative in physical and spiritual proximity. By loneliness they did not mean that they were physically alone in London, obviously. By stating that they felt lonely they were telling me that in London they missed their previous community, that they were longing for a community to be inserted into, to belong. After being evicted from her Aunt’s house, Mary felt “lonely,” “cut off,” “isolated,” “unwanted” and “in a desperate need of a friend.” Jothi spent much time, energy, money and personal charm organising parties

²³For Tamils the jungle is the place where there is no light and the ‘evil spirits’ (*pēy*) dwell and can take possession of people.

and get-togethers in order to escape loneliness; but the more parties she organised, the more lonely she felt; soon she learned that a noisy party with food and drink and dance is not the same as an intimate community and will not quench the thirst to belong; though she was living in London with her husband and child, she said:

I have realised the meaning of loneliness from the very day I landed in the UK.

Ratnam, who lives with his wife and two children and does not lack a 'job satisfaction' as a solicitor, stated with deep emotion (in fact with tears) the known distinction between 'loneliness' and 'aloneness' in these words:

Though I live with my wife and children I feel lonely (...) I would say very lonely here. Sometimes I tell my wife that I feel very lonely in this country. She says, "We are here, why do you feel lonely?" (*nāṅkal ellārum irukkiṛōm praku ēṇ taṇimai eṇṇu colluṛiṅkal?*) She isn't be able to understand my situation because she just stays at home. A woman may not feel this because women experience more freedom in the UK than in SL; but men are the most affected people here. I used to socialise with people in Sri Lanka. It's not happening in this country. (...) In the evening friends and acquaintances would come to my house for a chat in Sri Lanka. If I felt bored I just went to the compound gate; passing people would just stop, have a chat and go. Peace of mind is not here. No happiness either.

In Sri Lanka they lived in community and had communion and communication with each other. They find that all that is lost in London. Their Exodus and Diaspora are so recent and have come so suddenly! Tamil refugees in London cannot join the company of the Tamil 'professionals' because the professionals do not form a Tamil community and are scattered among the mainline British population. In order to live in a community, the refugees have to create it; and to create their own community they have to devise certain methods of socialisation²⁴ in London. They seek and find shelter and security, and the possibility of intimacy with friends and acquaintances, in the creation of their own ghettos (Ganesh, Satha) to replicate the social atmosphere of the village as far as it is possible, with necessary adaptations. There is no question of 'Why?' It is just a fact; they need a community and they create their own community, and from the bosom of their newly created (not newly found)

²⁴ We remind the reader that by the term 'socialisation' Sri Lankans mean getting together for some meaningful purpose, and usually the fact of being together is the purpose of socialisation, an end in itself.

community they look at their surroundings with a sense of self-affirmation. The transition to a metropolitan environment has shattered the ancestral family life. They wanted to experience an extended family system, but that was not available to them. Hanna could not experience the same family bond and community life in another country:

I was busy in Sri Lanka and had friends and relatives, even that was refused to me.

Ratnam explained what he meant when he used the word 'lonely':

I lived in a village called Manipay, where neighbours mingled with us like one family. When they cooked good food they brought some to us as well. If I was in a hurry and wanted to iron or smooth my clothing, a girl living in our neighbourhood would voluntarily come and say "*aṇṇai nāṇ iron paṇi tāraṇ.*" (Big brother! I will iron it for you).

People had time to do such things for each other in Sri Lanka; but all are now too busy in London. They have to make big money and make it quickly. Krishna said:

We should not come to this country alone. At least we need to come to this country with one sister or brother (....) People cannot live alone. There is no socialisation here. Everybody is always too busy.

Mary had the same experience:

All my sisters were close to me; suddenly I felt isolated from everyone. You can understand the meaning of loneliness only if you go through it.

The need to belong²⁵ is, no doubt, a universal biological, social and spiritual requirement for us if we are going to be fully human; without belonging somewhere we are spiritually, socially and even biologically dead. Erich Fromm, a psychoanalyst and philosopher, expressed the need to be related and to belong in these vigorous terms:

Unless he belonged somewhere, unless his life had some meaning and direction, he would feel like a particle of dust and overcome by his individual insignificance. He would not be able to relate himself to any system which would give meaning and direction to his life, he would be

²⁵ For additional information on the meaning of oneness and belonging in Tamil life, consult "The Ideology of Love" in Trawick, Margaret, *Notes on Love in a Tamil Family*. California: University of California Press, 1990, pp. 89-116.

filled with doubt, and this doubt eventually would paralyse his ability to act – that is, to live.²⁶

For many Sri Lankans, their entire familiar worldview was shattered in London. When they came to London they had grandiose dreams about their future. They thought that all their problems could be solved once they reached their dreamland. But they soon found that they were not accepted and that they belonged nowhere, neither here nor there; and without belonging they felt cut off, amputated from reality. Swarnan explained his struggle in life; contrary to all his expectations,

Within few months I got a job in a supermarket as a labourer. They get things in cardboard boxes and I had to tear them into pieces for easy disposal. One day I was doing this while thinking about my wife and children. I was worried that I had left them alone to live in the war area. I was doing this in an open space outside the shop. It was winter and my hands were freezing. I was thinking and praying: why I should have to suffer in a foreign land? I said, “Why should I suffer like this, God?” (*nān ēn ippaṭi kaṣṭa paṭa vēnum?*) I think it was around 6 o’clock in the evening, I heard the church bell. I felt like going to the church to pray alone. ... I went inside the church. There was something going on which I did not understand. All the people were white English people. I went and kneeled down, but suddenly started crying with a loud voice.

Lots and lots of lonely voices yearning to find a community to belong to, that will give meaning to their empty lives. Is it a common experience envisaged by Vimalan:

Sri Lankan people in the UK live in loneliness. (...) Starting a new life in another country is not an easy task.

Erich Fromm stressed that humans have a compelling need to belong to a community, “to avoid aloneness.”²⁷ This is indeed the universal human predicament, because man is by his very nature a social animal; that is more acutely felt by pre-industrial cultures, such as village Tamil culture; without adequate companionship Tamils feel that they do not exist, or if they exist, their existence is empty. The emotional feelings Tamil refugees shared in the previous pages about their lonely life in London corresponds very closely to Fromm’s analysis on solitude and belonging. At the risk of being too repetitive, we refer the reader

²⁶ Fromm, Erich, *Escape from Freedom*. New York: Avon Books, 1969 [1941], p. 36.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

again to Mary's case. Mary states at one point, "I was in desperate need of a friend." Mary's aunt lived in her son's house in London. Therefore she could not accommodate Mary and politely told her to find a place to live by herself. This was a most shattering shock for Mary, to be rejected by her loving Christian aunt.²⁸ but Mary was filled with terror at the perspective of "living alone" for the first time in her life, in a strange land. Erich Fromm concludes his analysis:

To feel completely alone and isolated leads to mental disintegration just as physical starvation leads to death. This relatedness to others is not identical with physical contact. An individual can be physically alone for many years and yet he may be related to ideas, values, or at least social patterns that give him a feeling of communion and "belonging." On the other hand, he may live among people and yet be overcome by an utter feeling of isolation, the outcome of which, if it transcends a certain limit, is the state of insanity which schizophrenic disturbances represent. This lack of relatedness to values, symbols, patterns, we may call moral aloneness and state that moral aloneness is as intolerable as the physical aloneness, or rather that physical aloneness becomes unbearable only if it implies also moral aloneness.²⁹

We do not need to expand on the disintegrating effect of suddenly being thrown out into the unfamiliar and unknown and the consequent feeling of solitude and void; one of the most recurrent expressions. It is no wonder, then, to hear the expression "I feel lonely" even from the lips of people who have managed to bring their families or have formed a family here.³⁰ Aimless wondering is a life without a destination and a goal, without a "Promised Land"; if there is no goal, there is no direction; if there is no direction, there is no purpose; and if there is no purpose to human life, then human life has no meaning. Tamils often lament the lack of

²⁸For Mary's admiration and affection to her aunt in Colombo, see her story of her relation to her loveless Hindu father and her loving Christian aunt in Chapter 4, sub section 4.2ff

²⁹ Fromm, Erich. *Escape from Freedom*. *op.cit.* p. 34.

³⁰Paul Tournier narrates numerous clinical cases of mental disturbances resulting mainly from the pervading feeling of loneliness among his patients. See Tournier, Paul, *Escape from Loneliness*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962. Both Eric Fromm and Paul Tournier agree that the sense of loneliness is universal and often leads to a personal disintegration. Perhaps the difference between the solitude of Tamils living in London and the solitude of others living in their own culture is a question of degree and diffusion, not of kind. It would be safe to say that, in London, refugees in general, and Tamils in particular, suffer the melancholy of solitude in a higher degree and more thoroughly than the rest of the population.

meaning and purpose of life, to the extreme, at least in the case of Singam, of seriously considering and even attempting suicide.

3.6 LACK OF MEANING: INNER TURMOIL

Among the many persons interviewed, it is the case of Singam who fits most accurately into this description: life in London, for him, has no meaning or purpose; if so, why should we continue living? Singam came from an economically depressed class in Sri Lanka. After some frustrating time in India, he came to the UK with great expectations of helping his family out of the mire in which they found themselves because of the war. He imagined that he could go back to Sri Lanka one day and there he would be treated with respect and honour as a man of substance. London was his Promised Land. His expectations in London were soon shattered to pieces. He just could not adjust to the fast pace of life in London. He felt that he was left alone in a strange land to find “ways and means of survival.” His ‘prosperous’ relatives in London turned their backs on him. He missed his relatives and family members and, in his own words, could not see “any meaning of life in London.” He often considered committing suicide, as we saw above.

What’s the point in living, if you don’t have any meaning in your life? I came to this country for a better future, but I became a confused person here. What do you expect one to do in such a situation?

Singam could not understand the language, the rules, and the values of the new society. He found that all bonds of solidarity had been severed, and he had been left abandoned, “lost in a big ocean of different culture, language and life style.”

I have some relatives who have been living in the UK since 1983. They are all well established and have English speaking children. I come from a depressed class background, did not study much [had to do odd jobs since boyhood] and therefore I can’t even speak or understand a single word of English. My relatives did not accept me because I was a misfit in their kinship. The first thing I learned in this country is that I am on my own.

Like so many Tamils in exile, Singam expected that the sacred bond of blood solidarity would be like a rope to help him out of the quicksand of life in exile. If that failed, he could not expect that any other bond of solidarity would help. In his experience we find a sequence of unwantedness - rejection - dereliction - loneliness - meaninglessness - despair. He had come to seek acceptance and respect, he found only rejection and contempt. In that situation,

... I went to a friend of mine and told him that I had decided to go back to Sri Lanka. He said that, before making any decision in that respect, I should attend a special Christian meeting with him on that day. He suggested that this meeting would help me to find peace in my life.

After joining the Christian community Singam found what he missed in his life: meaning and purpose, courage and determination, understanding and acceptance, peace and hope.

After becoming a Christian I was able to face the problems with courage and determination. (...) I firmly believe that God had brought me to this country for a purpose. He loved me and wanted me to experience the abundant life that he was offering.

For the British it may be as difficult to understand the Tamils as it was for me to understand the British the first time I came. In informal discussions with my flatmates I have come to realise that they [the British] have established for themselves a reputation for being self-made people, with their resourcefulness and self-reliance: they adapt and transform reality to serve their needs. They can achieve many things alone. By contrast, I saw that Tamil refugees had to rely on each other; they needed to belong, to be accepted. They needed a community. They can achieve very little if left to themselves.

The story of Ganesh has many points of similarity with the experience of Singam. But unlike Singam, Ganesh was well educated, very articulate and forceful in his expression. One night, in the middle of a strong argument with his wife, Ganesh stepped out of the house with a firm determination never to come back again. In our long conversations (Ganesh practically did all the talking), some of the most recurrent words were "alienation", "isolation," "disillusion." Ganesh is also most acutely aware of the Tamil condition of ambiguity and alienation of Tamil life in London, as we shall see later.

The West was a shock to Ganesh. Everything he had built in his imagination crumbled soon after his arrival. He had built up in his mind not certainties but a pile of uncertainties. Everything now looked so different from his expectations. Though he was able to meet British people and visit them in their houses, he felt that they never accepted him in their hearts. British people could talk to him in private or at their houses at ease; but in public nobody wanted to associate with him; they felt uneasy to state that he was their friend. These feelings "made me alienated, isolated and disillusioned in culture and life style." His feeling of alienation kept him away from everything; he lived in his wife's house without a job for one year. And then he reached the bottom.

As soon as I left the house I realised that I was left alone, lost in the big city of London. It was night and I did not have anyone to go to for help. So I cried and cried aloud. I just walked on the streets of London throughout that night without knowing where I was going (...) I even thought of going back to Sri Lanka. I went to the Council Advisory Bureau for some advice, but they suggested that I should go back to Sri Lanka. At that point I decided to stay and fight for my survival. I felt that I was going to die alone in the city of London without any meaning in life. (...) I tried to find some Sri Lankans who could help me at that point, but everybody refused to accept me, or ignored me thinking that I could become a burden for them.

At last Ganesh met someone who claimed to be a born-again Christian, who helped him by providing accommodation. He told Ganesh that he had found Christ in his life and that this encounter had given him peace and hope; he was willing to introduce Christ to Ganesh as well. Ganesh became a Christian in 1990.

We are comfortable and feel happy when we are able to interpret our reality within and without ourselves. In order to interpret reality, or to find meaning in life, we need an interpretative key adequate to open the doors of perception to that reality. Sri Lankan refugees have a different key. Social reality appears to them as a system of very strange signs and symbols (Ganesh). In order to understand reality we have to 'signify' it, to enclose it within a code or system of signs; then it has 'meaning' or 'signification.' But Tamil refugees come with a different constellation of symbolic meanings and meaningful symbols (Satha). They cannot understand one culture in terms of the other; social reality is strange to them, and also they are strangers to it; they may learn and discover the meaning of reality, but also they can impose a meaning on the symbolic reality they see. For example, a pub in Britain may be a symbol of conviviality; for Suriya, it may be a symbol and source of 'drunkenness', the beginning of 'vandalism', 'sex without commitment' and other evils. Instead of decoding that particular symbol, Suriya imposes his own meaning on the symbol. For Thamotharam, the house is the dwelling place of a family and their deities; it is sacred; consequently, the toilet cannot be built inside the house, because it is unholy; and he feels that here he cannot worship the household deities if the house is being constantly defiled.

When the conventional inherited symbols are no longer bearers of meaning, as Levin points out, when there are no clear guidelines in the social system to control people and give their lives' meaning and purpose, people will fall into confusion (anomic confusion), will tend to

reduce their world, and escape from the larger world they do no longer understand or accept. Levin writes:

... young people especially have joined religious and semi-religious groups in which daily life is regulated in almost military fashion. Diet, sexual behaviour, travel, and work are closely controlled.³¹

Social interaction and inter-personal communication require a commonly accepted system of signs and symbols with their respective meanings given to the signs employed. The lack of correspondence between signs and reality results in the sense of meaninglessness.³² When the old familiar signs have lost their significance and no new signs have developed to explain the new reality, we have the phenomenon of *anomie*; one of its most common expressions is meaning-less-ness. In my interviews the expression “meaning in life” (or lack thereof, “meaning-less-ness” [*nāy cīviyam*]) often comes accompanied with the expression “purpose for living”. A song composed by Tamil refugees in London explains this phenomenon clearly:

This is London?
Here many years
And for me...
There is nothing

Early, I went to school, then
I went to pubs,
I paid the college fees
Gathered my degrees
And still for me...
There is nothing.

Engineers, Solicitors,
Accountants and Doctors
Have forgotten themselves..
No longer Tamils,
But manufactured children of London
Who can't speak a word of Tamil
Masked in artificial sounds.
They can change the sound of their tongue:

³¹ Levin, William C., *Sociological Ideas - Concepts and Applications*. op.cit. pp. 301-2.

³² Blauner, Robert, *Alienation and Freedom: the factory worker and his industry*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964, p. 22.

Can they change the colour of their skin?³³

Meaninglessness produces an acute sense of anxiety or anguish that Paul Tillich understands as “due to the loss of a spiritual centre.”³⁴ In describing the nature of man Paul Tillich analyses three types of anxiety as responses to the threat of non-being, namely:

- a) Anxiety of fate and death (ontological anxiety);
- b) Anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness (spiritual anxiety); and
- c) Anxiety of guilt and condemnation (moral anxiety).³⁵

Durkheim’s sociological concept of *anomie* and Tillich’s theological/philosophical concept of anxiety are closely related to each other. When we turn to the oral testimonies of the Tamil refugees in London, we obtain interesting data in this respect. First, in the interviews there is no single mention of sin, forgiveness, reconciliation or other terms associated with guilt and salvation from guilt. An important corollary is that the Tillich’s “anxiety of guilt and condemnation” seems to play a shadowy secondary role in the Tamil perception of their human condition in exile. Second, it is surprising, in interviewing people familiar with death and dying, to find no explicit mention of fear of death; consequently, the Tillich’s “anxiety of fate and death” also plays a secondary role in the lives of Tamils refugees. Third, the frequent mention of “lack of meaning” that goes accompanied with “no-peace of mind” and less frequently with “no-purpose” is so overwhelming, that Tillich’s “anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness” acquires an importance of high proportions. Tillich writes:

We use the term meaninglessness for the absolute threat of non-being to spiritual self-affirmation, and the term emptiness for the relative threat to it. They are no more identical than are the threat of death and fate. But in the background of emptiness lies meaninglessness as death lies in the background of the vicissitudes of fate.³⁶

Tillich then proceeds with his characteristic theological terminology of “ultimate concern”:

³³ Taken from *Tamil Reggae* an audiocassette produced by Tamils in London.

³⁴ Tillich, Paul, *The Courage to be*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1952, p. 48.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

³⁶ Tillich, Paul, *The Courage to be. op.cit.* p. 47.

The anxiety of meaninglessness is anxiety about the loss of an ultimate concern, of a meaning, which gives meaning to all meanings. This anxiety is aroused by the loss of a spiritual centre, of an answer, however symbolic or indirect, to the question of the meaning of existence.³⁷

Then Tillich continues with the definition of “anxiety of emptiness” which, surprisingly, resembles our concept of self-alienation so characteristic of Tamil refugees in London, at least of the Sri Lankan Tamils converted to Christianity.

The anxiety of emptiness is aroused by the threat of non being to the special contents of the spiritual life. A belief breaks down through external events or inner processes: one is cut off from creative participation in a sphere of culture, one feels frustrated about something which one had passionately affirmed, or is driven from devotion to one object of devotion to another and again to another, because the meaning of each of them vanishes and the creative Eros is transformed into indifference or aversion. Everything is tried and nothing satisfies. The contents of tradition, however excellent, however loved once, lost their power to give content today. And present culture is even less able to provide the content.³⁸

I can find no more accurate description of the human predicament of Tamil refugees in London, especially among teachers, students and professionals, who constitute the majority. Tillich continues with relentless clarity and accuracy

Anxiously one turns away from all concrete contents and looks for an ultimate meaning, only to discover that it was precisely the loss of a spiritual centre which took away the meaning from the special contents of the spiritual life. But a spiritual centre cannot be produced intentionally, and the attempt to produce it only produces deeper anxiety. The anxiety of emptiness drives us to the abyss of meaninglessness.³⁹

Tamil refugees in London feel acutely that they have lost that centre to which they can turn to orient their lives at all moments, and which irradiates meaning to life in all situations. The family is lost, the village is lost, the temple is lost; can they recreate these three pillars in London? That would be a goal to achieve that could give direction, purpose and meaning to their lives. At least many of them have attempted the task.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 47-8.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

3.7 PURPOSE AND DIRECTION IN LIFE

Most of the interviewees have paid large amounts of money⁴⁰ to different 'travel agents' to organise their travel to the UK. They did not possess much liquid cash nor did they have anyone to grant them a loan for that amount. The amount is, in Sri Lankan currency value, one hundred times larger than the sterling pounds. Therefore, with the exception of a few, all have borrowed money from relatives and neighbours, often at interest. Their travel was illegal, and so there was no way for them to apply for a loan through any lawful organisation like a bank. Even if they applied, they could not provide any documentary proof to show the purpose for the loan. They have to repay the debt contracted with a 'travel agent.' This is one immediate purpose of their lives in London. Its achievement requires a long time of hard labour and thrift; the first goal is to earn as much as possible, spend as little as possible, in as little time as possible. They also have to support their families back home and many have assumed the responsibility of saving money to pay dowry for their sisters to get married in Sri Lanka⁴¹, and often also to sponsor some relatives to join them in London. The case of Swarnan may be considered as extreme, but it is not unique. When Swarnan arrived in the United Kingdom, he proposed for himself the Noble Eightfold Task that we mentioned in the introductory chapter. He worked for 19 hours a day to settle his loan and fulfil other family responsibilities. Not only he was concerned about his family, but also he was willing to find money to pay dowries to his sister's three daughters, help his brother and mother. The only meaning he found in his life was work for others, and rest a little in order to be able to work even more ("I worked like an animal," he said).⁴²

⁴⁰ See also "Cost and Journey" in McDowell, Christopher, *A Tamil Asylum Diaspora: Sri Lankan Migration, Settlement and Politics in Switzerland*. *op.cit.*, pp. 219-24.

⁴¹ The majority of Tamil refugees in London are young. The Asylum Statistics Report of 1997 states that the majority of asylum applicants to the UK are "relatively young." In 1997, as in previous years, approximately two-thirds were between 21 and 34 years old, with less than 5 per cent aged 50 or older. See Watson, Madeleine & Danzelman, Phillip, *Asylum Statistics United Kingdom 1997*. London: Government Statistical Service, 21 May 1998, p. 5.

⁴² Thani Nayagam, a Tamil scholar, talks about Humanism as mandatory cultural aspect among Sri Lankan Tamil people. See Thani Nayagam, *Tamil Culture and its Characteristics*. *op.cit.*, p. 25.

In order to unburden themselves of that load, Tamil refugees need to save all they can and send it to their families in Sri Lanka, so they need to stay here longer than their visa allows them to stay. Swarnan:

I reached this country with lots of anxiety and fear. I did not know what was going to happen to me.⁴³ I wasn't sure whether I would be allowed to enter the country.

As he expected, his application was rejected, but was given a six months visa. The visa was extended after every six months. So his only aim was to repay the loan and fulfil his financial obligations to his family members. Swarnan continues:

I lived comfortably in Sri Lanka and now I work like an animal (...) I go to work at 5.30 in the morning and come back at 5 o'clock in the evening. Then eat my lunch and go to another place at 6 o'clock and come back at 11 o'clock. I take a bath, eat something and go to bed around 12 midnight. (...) It's very difficult, but I had to work like this to meet the demands on me. I paid 550,000 rupees (£5,500.00) to come to the UK.

Like Swarnan, Krishna, another young teacher from Sri Lanka, did exhausting and backbreaking work (*tumpu aṭittal*⁴⁴). In most of the cases survival depends exclusively on hard work and thriftiness:

Krishna: [For two years] I slept for only four hours a day. I don't think you can even imagine what I have done during this period. For example, if I leave my house on a Friday morning, I get back home on Saturday at 11 p.m. I go to work on a Friday morning for eight hours; then in the evening I go to Europa (name of a grocery chain of stores); then from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. I go to Notting Hill Gate; from there I go to Tottenham Court and then again to Notting Hill Gate and finally home. Sometimes I could not get up from bed. Even if I heard the alarm clock I could not get up. Work - Sleep - Work - Sleep. (...) One day after work I went to the underground railway station and waited for the train to go to the other job. I was very tired; I felt that I was dreaming; in my dream a train came

⁴³ Alison Parker's study among Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in USA shows that constant fear of deportation prevailed among the interviewees. See Parker, Alison L., *The Semiotics of "Home": The Complexities of Life as a Sri Lankan in Exile*. *op.cit.*, p. 76.

⁴⁴ There is no single English term for *tumpu aṭittal*. It means removing the core from the coconut husk for different purposes in Sri Lanka. It is an extremely laborious and difficult work, and that is what Krishna meant when he used this phrase - *tumpu aṭittal*.

and went; but actually I was not dreaming: I was just too tired. (...) I could not distinguish between reality and dream.

The “remittance economy” is also very important for the London Tamils, because they continue supporting their family members’ survival during the war in their motherland. The remittance is not a repayment of a debt, but a duty of solidarity based on blood. This was the case of Sinathurai, and also of Sathivel, when they came to the UK leaving their wives and children back in Sri Lanka. So they continuously support their families in addition to the repayment of the loan obtained to come to the UK. In the case of Swarnan, he was also trying to build up capital to make dowries, so that his sister’s three daughters could find good bridegrooms. He said:

I need to stay in this country permanently to fulfil all these things. I believe the Tamil proverb, which says, “if you look after someone else’s child, your child will grow without any help.” (*piṛar pillai talai taṭava taṇ pillai tāṇē valarum*) When I help my sister’s children I do not expect them to do something for me. I trust God. He will help me to fulfil my responsibilities. (...) Somehow I need to get permanent residence in the UK. Then I can help my sister’s children and sponsor my wife and children to come to London. That’s my fervent prayer, and I believe God will fulfil 100% of my wish. In Tamil there is a proverb “If you continuously hit the grinding stone, it will move.” (*aṭikku mēl aṭi aṭittāl amiyum nakarum*) I need to pray continuously for God’s action. (...)

Things are complicated by the expectations of family members who are still living in Sri Lanka. They are convinced that London (they equate the entire Great Britain with London) is the land of plenty, and they little know of the tribulations of London refugees, because they do not mention them in their letters, to avoid further affliction to their families. This is the moving, grievous testimony of Sathivel, the skilful carpenter from Jaffna:

While I was in Sweden my faith grew slowly. I started reading the Bible and other Christian books. My family found it difficult to accept me because I had come back home with only a Bible. My wife said, “People go to foreign countries to earn money; you did not bring any money, but have come with a Bible!” Even my children did not accept me. I wanted to go to a church, but my wife would not allow me. I left it like that, without causing more problems within the family.

With the greatest sacrifices they have sponsored a particular person to travel to the UK and then compel him/her to make big money in the shortest time. So the majority of them did not plan to buy properties in London. Instead, as Singam said,

Tamils try to earn money, as much as possible. They are afraid that they will be sent back to Sri Lanka at any moment. Even if we are sent back I do not know whether we will be allowed to take our savings (....)

There is some basis for Singam's fear, because the authorities recently have rejected most of the asylum cases. Therefore a person like Sinathurai feels that he cannot establish his life in the UK:

My wife was sending letter after letter asking me to do something to bring her to the UK. I think it is impossible and a waste of money. (...) My case was rejected, so what's the point of bringing my wife into this mess? This climate does not agree with me. I have developed a blood circulation problem and it is getting worse in the winter. (....)

It is not my intention to romanticise the extreme hardships that Tamil refugees have to undergo in order to survive. Most often they are victims of voracious travel agents, and also of the appetite for foreign currency of the relatives left at home.

To these marks of meaninglessness, purposelessness and aimlessness my interviewees emphasise another one, most important for understanding the dual nature of refugee life in London, namely, the sense of permanent liminality.⁴⁵ We are going to see how the liminal existence on the fringes of the dominant society (life in the ghettos) is both an expression of loneliness with all the corollaries that the disinherited feel, and an attempt to escape loneliness by creating alternative modes of association, participating in some degree of the life of the dominant culture, and participating also in the salvaged remnants of the minority culture. Ghettos could be considered as 'pockets of meaning' where Tamil refugees (or other minorities) can share the same reality and the symbols to encode it.

3.8 LIMINAL LIFE

By the term "liminality" we here understand the social and cultural condition of an individual or group that share the world view (the 'myths'), social rituals, and the code of moral values of two cultures; in Turner's terms, people living on the threshold of two

⁴⁵ For my reflections on liminality I am indebted to the British anthropologist Victor Turner. See especially Chapter 6: "Passages, Margins, and Poverty: Religious Symbols of Communitas" in Turner, Victor, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. NY: Cornell University Press, 1974, pp. 231-37.

cultures do not have a fixed existence “neither here nor there,”⁴⁶ but coexist in the same geographical territory. Liminal existence is a life in tension, and usually the ambiguity of not knowing exactly where they belong leads liminal people to a severe strain that can result, and often results, in an identity crisis. The Tamil ‘professionals’ solved the tension by way of assimilation: they crossed all the way to the other side and burnt their bridges; or they crossed the ‘threshold’ (*limen*), locked the door behind them, and threw the key away; others try to remain within the narrow limits of their own *kalāccāram*, rejecting and hostile towards the majority dominant culture and are not only ‘liminals’ (Turner prefers ‘liminars’) but also ‘marginals.’⁴⁷ The majority of the first generation of refugees fall somewhere in between, though leaning more towards Tamil culture as a protective matrix. Familiarity with, and acceptance of, the new culture is a process that may take years for older people, or only months for children attending the schools of the dominant culture. Ganesh most forcefully expresses this:

Ganesh: Asians have to seesaw all the time. When you go outside, you must try to be a Westerner; and when you come home, you have to be an Asian. There is an identity problem among Asians. I like to use the expression “split identity”; even Asian children suffer a lot because of this.

Me: Please explain what you mean by “split identity.”

Ganesh: We are living two different lives. It is not easy for anybody to come to a different culture and country and start from scratch, because we did not bring any possessions with us. We are not accepted in Britain. (...) We are tolerated rather than accepted. I have plenty of experiences in this respect, too numerous to mention.

Me: Mention one or two, then.

Ganesh: Western culture is a far cry for us. We cannot adopt Western culture wholly. We can adapt ourselves to some extent. (...) You see, Southall is a ghetto. All the Asians have come to a city, and there they have formed their own culture; then you don’t know that you are living in Britain. And the British people don’t know that there is a place like this. So Asians have created a ghetto here. To be in the ghetto you need to use your colour as a uniform. (...) They [the British people] don’t like the way you are, the way you look, the way your physique is, and the way we live. (...) Once you come here, you need to learn the survival methods. And then comes the language problem. English is a very difficult language for us, because of the irregular verbs. Sometimes it’s not easy to learn the

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

⁴⁷ For the distinction between “liminality” and “marginality” see *Ibid.*, pp. 232-3.

accent. (...) These are some of the reasons why I can't get along with white people.

Tamil refugees in London find that their worst enemies are their sound and their colour, their tongue and their skin. This is one of the reasons why they gather together in intimate proximity (neighbourhood) in order to be what they are and live the way they used to live. And then in the ghetto - in Ganesh's own words - they wear their distinct and different brown colour as a uniform to proclaim who they are and that they belong there. And if they belong there, they feel that they are not accepted or wanted on the other side of the threshold. "Acceptance" and "belongingness" and "self-definition" are key factors in Ganesh's conversion and incorporation into the Christian community, as we shall see in the next chapter. He concludes his reflections on self-identity and mutual hostility between the two cultures:

If you are alone with a majority of white people around, you feel uncomfortable. You feel very unsafe and insecure. I felt it often because I used the train for travelling. I used to sit in a crowded compartment. If you sit in a compartment where there are white boys, you are easily bullied or mugged for no reason at all.

Being an alien, for Ganesh, is like having no existence: "you belong nowhere, you are neither here nor there." And yet, the white people have to acknowledge your presence in the midst of them, and feel impelled to assert the supremacy of white British culture because, in the minds of many, aliens pose a threat to their livelihood. Ganesh continues with reflections on another theme:

White people think that Asians pose a threat to their livelihood, that we take their jobs and occupy their houses. True, we quickly adapt and grab whatever the job is. Jobs 9-5 are out of the question for us; so we work unsociable hours or do an unpopular job. You have to become a workaholic until you settle down. It's a strain on you and your family. You may even get into depression, mainly because you belong nowhere; you are neither here nor there.

The thirst to belong cannot be quenched if you are not accepted, if you are pushed out; this is a self-evident truth. And Tamils feel that they are not accepted by the dominant culture because they are different from the familiar norm; they are extra-normal, abnormal, alien, strangers. Tamils do not usually refer to this non-acceptance as 'racism.' They just accept

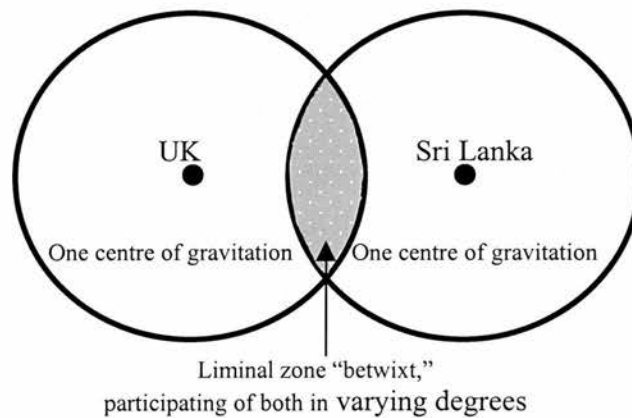
the fact. And they are forced to feel uncomfortable within their dark skins and the sound of their voices. We continue with Ganesh:

Our accent is different from the British people; so it takes longer time for them to understand what we are saying. I understand every word that they speak to me, but we cannot get their accent. You have to be born in Britain to get that accent, or come as a boy. (...) As soon as you open your mouth, everyone knows that you were not born in Britain. (...) If you speak English with Sri Lankan accent, then people know that you do not belong here. (...) Their blood boils ... and they try to provoke you.

In order to survive on the threshold of two cultures often in antagonism, one has to develop the art of living dangerously. This liminal condition explained by Ganesh can be provisional or permanent.⁴⁸ In the case of provisional liminality, people have the knowledge and the purpose that they live provisionally here, with the intention and the hope that one day they will live permanently over there; they are travellers in transit here. Tamil 'professionals' intending to become British citizens were in a kind of unrepeatable transit from one culture to the other when they arrived at this country, a point of no return; if they go back to Sri Lanka at all, they will go as tourists, and as British citizens. They were willing to relinquish and leave behind forever the worldview, rituals and codes of values that were familiar and almost equivalent with their personalities, and learn, adopt and assimilate the worldview, rituals and codes of values of the dominant culture within which they are now living. This is the option of 'assimilation' in order to escape the ambiguity of being 'neither this nor that.' In other words, Tamil 'professionals' undergoing this process of assimilation aim at carving for themselves a room in the new culture and installing themselves permanently in their new cultural habitat. But as long as they are living on the razor's edge, so to speak, they suffer from the acute identity crisis, voiced by some of my interviewees.

We may illustrate, and perhaps also clarify this passage with the following diagram:

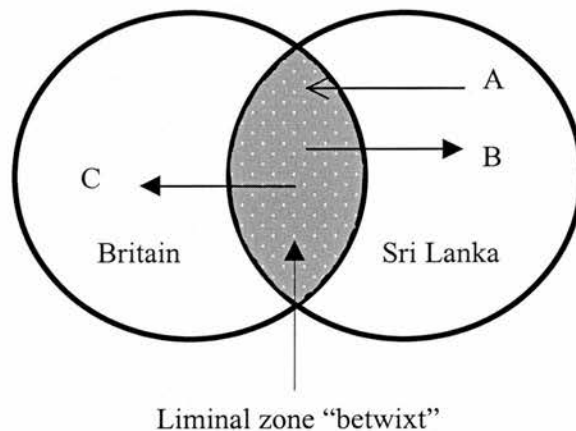
⁴⁸ See *Ibid.*, p. 2.



Tamil refugees struggle to live in permanent liminality; if they persist in being permanently 'refugees' (a seeming impossibility), ultimately they will install themselves on the periphery of society as 'marginals.'⁴⁹ They refuse to install themselves permanently over there and determine to live permanently down here, in solidarity with their own people. They choose to live, in between or, in Turner's vocabulary, "betwixt."⁵⁰ They have to cross bridges back and forth and try to feel equally familiar on both sides of the bridge; but they feel the strain of the effort, not the elation of the achievement; for that they need a cultural elasticity that they do not have. They are suffering from a condition of *anomie* because they have not solved their identity problem by stammering in two cultures. This liminal existence requires a high degree of elasticity and adaptability that Tamil refugees do not seem to possess. Yet, the Tamil self-affirmation that often leads them to the presumption that their culture is far better than the British culture prevents them from crossing every day from one universe of discourse to the other, and of casting one culture into the mould of the other; this results in constant uncertainty and fear; in this fear, they will probably end by installing themselves on the margins of the mainline society, and so will become and remain 'marginals' by choice, 'liminals' by necessity; they choose to live with their own people, but have to interact with the British people. The following diagram may illustrate our meaning:

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 233.



- a) The Tamils in Exodus and Diaspora, still going on
- b) Lean towards the past (Marginals -Tamil refugees: more Tamil than British)
- c) Lean towards the future (Assimilated - Tamil professionals: more British than Tamils)

Krishna the teacher is concerned for perpetuating the Tamil values here from one generation to another; here are some of his utterances:

I can live here, but if I have children I will not allow them to grow up here. I have also seen people taken their children to be educated in India. (...) We have a culture, we cannot deny that. From my perspective I cannot approve or accept the life style here.

Satha's testimony explains this dilemma clearly:

The most important dilemma among Sri Lankan refugees is that they do not know where they belong. Some of them try to imitate British people, but soon they realise that they cannot mimic every aspect of British life. Others try to live as Sri Lankans here; they too realise that they cannot do it in another country. So they are caught up in confusion, and do not know what kind of life they should live in a country like Britain. Children who were born in this country will be able to adjust their lives to suit the culture here; but not people like me; I lived in Sri Lanka half of my life and try to live the other half here; we are the people who find it difficult to adjust our lives in Britain. Our life is like a tug-a-war in this country. Sometimes we go towards one side, other times we move towards the other.

As in the case of Ganesh, perfect dual-culture is an almost impossible goal to achieve. Satha states:

I love our Tamil language. I could have just gone to an English speaking church and become a Christian there; but that is not my point. Like me, several Hindus went to Tamil churches just because we loved our language. Initially I did not bother about God and worshipping in Tamil. I thought that worship in a Hindu temple would quench my spiritual thirst. Yet, my familiarity with Christian religion made me worship in Tamil churches and later made me a born-again Christian.

His incorporation into a Christian community gave Satha the opportunity of meeting similar souls in chaos. His feelings and attitudes towards the wider dominant culture, however, did not change significantly with his conversion.

Sri Lankans have no friends among white British people. I do not have close friends among British people. I work with British people, talk to them and laugh with them; but it is only in the office. I do not invite them to my house. Purely because I measure them with my Sri Lankan yardstick and I feel they measure me with their British yardstick. For example, when I see them spending their time in a pub, I say that British people drink all the time and that they cannot survive without alcohol. Yet, for them it is part of their culture. On the other hand, they see us inside the house all the time and think that Sri Lankans spend their time just sitting inside and talking to each other. Maybe future generations will be able to understand the situation in a better way.

Women also feel the strain of liminal life, though less dramatically than men do. In Sri Lankan Tamil villages the roles of the sexes are rather clearly defined. The male is the sole breadwinner of the household, and the female spends her time taking care of the house, the children and the garden around the house. But in London Tamil women are compelled to become breadwinners to help pay all the household expenses. It is not infrequent for Tamil households in London to have the mother as the sole breadwinner, while the husband stays at home or hangs around. We have met the case of Ganesh, who stayed at home without employment for a whole year, developed a low self-esteem and ended by breaking the marriage. The new life style adopted in order to face the hard reality in London has developed into folklore in the ghettos; folklore often speaks more eloquently than verbal testimonies. Some songs are widely accepted because they touch a cord in the hearts of common folk. Here we have the translation of a song of an unemployed husband of a well-

employed wife; he stays at home, buys the groceries, takes care of their child Mohan, and submits to his wife in his worthlessness:

Come on, Mohan, come on;
Don't cry, my baby;
Mummy will be here
In just a minute.

My wife goes to work
And earns lots of money;
Shopping with her salary
She brings coins to the dwelling.

She can't cook rice'n curry;
She likes to eat "take away."
"You cook good food for me,
You are nice, a nice husband"
She says, says she.

"Weekends are for visiting,
You do the shopping.
Just buy a new car,
Like other people do"
She says, says she.

"Be a Tamil woman!
Dress like one!"
"Always the same
old fashion husband!"
She says, says she.

Whatever I say,
good or bad,
"You can say what you like,
I don't care!"
She says, says she.⁵¹

Life in London offers young Tamil women a greater amount of independence and freedom and at the same time makes it difficult for older women to wear the distinctive marks of their Tamil womanhood: saris, jewellery and the *pottu* on their forehead. Young Tamil women in

⁵¹ Taken from *Tamil Reggae* an audiocassette produced by Tamils in London.

London do not seem to regret the loss of their distinctive dress code; even if they regret it, well deep down it is not regret in full force; some of them even wear jeans. On the contrary older Tamil women in London (as well as in Sri Lankan towns and cities) cling tenaciously to the traditional ways. These two opposing attitudes are clearly expressed by Saro (a woman in her early fifties) and her daughter Jeya (a young woman in her early twenties):

Saro: For me staying in London is a problem. In my country I was able to visit many friends and relatives, but here I am inside the house for 24 hours. (...) I feel that I am a sick person in London. There is an urge within me saying "Sri Lanka! Sri Lanka!" (...) I would prefer to go back.

Jeya: I don't mind going for a holiday to Sri Lanka, but I have my doubts whether I would like to go and settle down in Sri Lanka. For example that day I went to the church toilet and there was no toilet roll. I found it very difficult to manage without a toilet roll. In Sri Lanka we do not use toilet rolls. I don't think I will be able to go back to that situation.

Saro: Jeya! You should know that toilet roll was available even when we were there.

Jeya: Yes, I agree, but my question is, did we use it? Let me then use another example. I have a car here. I am able to move around freely, go shopping, visit people; but in Sri Lanka these facilities are not available. I can go and stay in Sri Lanka for a maximum period of three months. I cannot stay after that. Sri Lankans are very inquisitive, but here nobody bothers about others. I would prefer this.

Yet, some younger women interviewed expressed their desire (and impossibility) to live as Tamil women in London, with their distinctive marks of cultural identity and their code of conduct. Thus Mary confesses:

[After coming to London] I felt everything was taken away from me. When I imagined London, it sounded good and prosperous; but the actual situation was different. (...) I am a Tamil girl; you may understand what I mean [a long pause]. I never had any boyfriends in my life; but when I saw the way English girls moved with boys, I became frightened. I thought my life was going to be ruined by someone in London. I love Tamil culture and life style. I wanted to live like a Tamil woman, but did not know how to do it in a different set up.

Tamil liminal existence is not like a circle with one single centre of reference and gravitation. It is rather like an ellipse, gravitating around two centres of power: on one extreme is English, the centre of social, economic, academic and political power; on the other is Tamil, the centre of affective power. Tamils feel torn between the two. Is it possible to get both? In the case of Ratnam and also in the cases of others working in British offices

and enterprises it seems that the process has been completed; but also they have to live on a kind of loose rope, without falling into one side or the other; Ratnam the solicitor has opted to live like a Tamil among Tamils; other professionals have opted to live among white British as if they were British, although not so white.

3.9 ALIENATION AND PARTICIPATION

The day Princess Diana died so tragically (31 August 1997), the British population was in shock, grief and mourning. It was a Sunday. I went to the Church of God Tamil Church in Tooting, London and, to my surprise, there was no single mention of the tragedy during the service and during the long get-together of the congregation in the church hall. This is not an expression of hardness of heart among the refugees, but of their degree of alienation from the British national sentiment. We could say that refugees care for their own living, and they care for their own dead. They constantly mention their own dead (tragically dead) in Sri Lanka, but they seem to have no thought of grief for the tragically dead in Great Britain.

This lack of concern for things belonging to the wider dominant society is a clear mark of alienation from it and of refuge into the reduced circle of the Tamil Christian community. In this respect, perhaps a better term for 'alienation' would be 'self-estrangement'⁵²: people joining and participating in small communities within the large mass of the dominant society decide to become strangers and aliens from that society, in search of a better one, "the city of the future".⁵³ This choice of being and remaining "strangers and aliens" (self-estrangement and self-alienation) is an indication of an existing and pervading anomic state in society and a decision to escape from it. Peter Berger⁵⁴ distinguishes between 'objective alienation' imposed upon the workers by the working conditions of modern society and the self-imposed 'subjective alienation,' which is a matter of free choice and decision; we prefer to call Berger's 'subjective alienation' by the term 'self-estrangement'. In this sense, the decision to repudiate the wider society and embrace the intimate community, far from being

⁵² Blauner, Robert, *Alienation and Freedom: the factory worker and his industry. op.cit.*, pp. 26-32.

⁵³ The feeling of being strangers, pilgrims and aliens in the midst of the dominant (pagan) culture is stressed in the Epistle to the Hebrews (Heb. 11: 9-10, 14-16; 13: 14) and in 1 Peter (1 Peter 1: 1, 11).

⁵⁴ See Peter Berger's *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion. op.cit.*, especially the entire chapter devoted to the subject "Religion and Alienation," pp.90ff.

part of the state of *anomie*, is an attempt to escape its uncertainties, ambiguities and insecurity, to take refuge in the protective matrix of a sect, or a political movement, or just a gang, to find there certitude in their verities, self-definition in the definition of the group, and security in the solidarity of its members. The revolutionary (such as the LTTE in Sri Lanka) repudiates society as it is and sets with others to the task of creating a new, better society; the decision to join the 'movement' resembles the phenomenon of conversion, as we shall see in our next chapter; the religious person (especially of the 'sect-type' as contrasted with the 'church-type')⁵⁵ also protests against the living conditions of a heartless society⁵⁶ and takes refuge in the inner affective community of religion; this decision and state is commonly called 'religious alienation' or self-estrangement; it presupposes the recognition of a state of *anomie* in the wider society and is an attempt to escape from it. Thus Peter Berger states:

It is once more very important not to confuse this phenomenon of subjective alienation with anomie. On the contrary, such alienation can be a most effective barrier against anomie. Once the false unity of the self is established, and as long as it remains plausible, it is likely to be a source of inner strength. Ambivalences are removed. Contingencies become certainties. There is no more hesitation between alternative possibilities of conduct. The individual "knows who he is" – a psychologically most satisfactory condition.⁵⁷

This analysis is true of the 'subjective alienation' entailing a flight from the wider society and a refuge into the inner community. In the wider dominant British culture Tamil refugees feel the pangs of *anomie*, but in the inner circle of their Pentecostal communities they feel at home. Their escape from the "nightmare world of anomie"⁵⁸ (Peter Berger) is only temporary; they depend on and have to live most of the time in the midst of the hostile wider

⁵⁵ This widely accepted distinction was proposed by Ernst Troelsch in his *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1931, 2 vols. The contrast between the two is found in Vol. 1, pp. 331-343. Here I am using its transcription found in Schneider, Louis (ed.), *Religion, Culture and Society – A Reader in the Sociology of Religion*. London: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1964, pp.457-465.

⁵⁶ See Fischer, Ernst (ed.), [Anna Bostock (tr.)], *The Essential Marx*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1970, p20.

⁵⁷ Berger, Peter, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. *op.cit.*, p. 94.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

society, and this strain adds to their anomic state. But if we compare the four marks of alienation (powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, and self-estrangement)⁵⁹ offered by Robert Blauner and other industrial sociologists, then the state of alienation of the refugees (as well as of the industrial workers) seems to be intimately related with their state of *anomie*, though they are not totally equated.

We translate the Tamil word *pirivu* for alienation as is customary in Tamil dictionaries. The word 'alienation' has become common currency in Marxist thought both in economic terms (estrangement of the worker from his own activity and the products of his labour) and religious terms (religion as the consolation and refuge in an illusory world in the beyond); it has also been used by existentialist philosophers to denote an "inauthentic existence" of the individual who becomes lost in the human mass⁶⁰ and hence loses his own individual personality. Without discarding other meanings, for operational purposes here we shall focus on the concept of *alienation* as proposed by modern industrial sociologists, and especially Robert Blauner⁶¹ and Levin. Levin's definition of alienation; it is very close to his definition of *anomie* that we have previously adopted. For Levin alienation is:

A condition of social ambiguity in which an individual has lost the meaning of his or her participation in social roles⁶²

This definition fits well the social predicament of refugees, with one important caution: refugees have not lost the meaning of their participation; they have not yet understood that meaning, if there is any meaning at all, in their own view. Most of the social roles refugees have to play in London have the character of provisionality, and the only meaning they may have is "we have no other chance than doing this for the time being." The sense of powerlessness is self-evident among Tamil refugees. They feel in London like a bee against the windowpane. Mary said:

⁵⁹ See Blauner, Robert, *Alienation and Freedom: the factory worker and his industry*. op.cit., pp. 16-32.

⁶⁰ Perhaps it was the Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset the one who introduced the concepts of 'mass man', 'mass behaviour' and the like. See his Ortega y Gasset, Jose, *The Revolt of the Masses*. London: Unwin Books, 1961.

⁶¹ Blauner, Robert. *Alienation and Freedom: the factory worker and his industry*, op.cit., p. 15.

⁶² Levin, William C., *Sociological Ideas - Concepts and Applications*, op.cit., p. 299.

They are different from us. They do things differently which we do not understand and internalise into our life style.

Life in a Western society was a shock for many of my interviewees. According to them, in Sri Lanka they went to school, read books and papers; but everything was written in Tamil and related to Tamil culture and life style. They were proud of the fact that their language is one of the ancient languages of the world. They were proud of belonging to the Dravidian Tamil race as they call it. Therefore they did not understand or accept anything other than Tamil. Things that were different from their accepted way of life were analysed using the Tamil way of life as the measuring rod, and judged everything using Tamil tradition and culture as points of reference. "I am a Tamil girl; you may understand what I mean." said Mary one of my interviewees in London. Mary:

I never had any boy friends in my life, but when I saw the way English girls moved with boys I became frightened. I thought my life was going to be ruined by someone in London. I wanted to live like a Tamil woman, but did not know how to do it in a different cultural set-up.

Suriya puts his experience of Tamilhood as an alien cultural life style under threat with these words:

I was worrying about my country and people; but students here were talking about having sex with different girls. Spending hours and hours in pubs and then breaking glass windows of shops, sleeping with girls without any commitment, and going to dances without worrying about their studies, all this made me confused.

Coming from a traditional home in Jaffna, where education is given utter priority, Suriya was confused because he could not understand the different educational system. According to him the educational process should help one to pass the examination successfully, so that he could enter university, and that would give him the opportunity to get a job. Suriya:

In Jaffna I attended special tuition classes for every subject. I got up at 6 o'clock in the morning to attend special tuition classes before I went to school. Then after school I came home, had my lunch and then went to tuition classes again. In London no one went for special classes. How can they study without extra help?

For Suriya, Tamils in Jaffna treated education in that way, always depending on others who know better, and in their minds that is the only proper way to approach education; this is a

vestige of guruism: we need the teachers all the time if we want to find and follow the truth. While I was doing my field research, I saw that private tuition classes were organised among Sri Lankan Tamils in London, and children were compelled to attend those classes. Ganesh said:

Asians study for practical reasons. They have to study to survive. An English boy doesn't have to survive in his own country; he can just live.

3.10 NO PEACE (*camātāṇam illai*)

The inner turmoil characteristic of the state of *anomie* can be manifested in many ways, from aimless activity in the pursuit of pleasure to mental paralysis. Most of the Tamils interviewed in London express this turmoil with the word “no-peace” (*camātāṇam illai*). After their joining the new Christian community they found “peace” (*camātāṇam*). The case of Hanna is the most conspicuously expressed:

[In Sri Lanka] I was proud to be a Hindu Tamil. For me Hinduism did not do any harm; instead it helped me to grow into Tamil womanhood. The amount of time I spent in the *pillaiyār*⁶³ temple in front of our house in Pandatherippu made me a proud religious person. At one time I believed that *pillaiyār* would give me prosperity in everything I did.

After her father's death she went to Holland to stay with her sister (a converted Christian) and take care of her mother dying of cancer. She became immersed in a Christian atmosphere with prayer meetings, Bible studies, watching evangelistic videos and singing Christian songs. She was being pushed to abandon her Hindu allegiance and embrace Christianity instead.

My mother told me many times that I should read the Bible. I said “yes” to her, but I never did it. I wanted to practise Hinduism in the same way I did in Sri Lanka. I wanted to sing religious songs (*tēvāram*) and worship my God *pillaiyār*. But I did not get a chance to do all that in my sister's house. So I kept my *pillaiyār* picture in my room and sang songs quietly and worshipped God. However, I must say that I did not get peace through Hindu religion in the way I got it in Sri Lanka. Also I thought

⁶³ *pillaiyār* is another name of the god Ganesha. He has countless devotees in South India and Sri Lanka. He has the head of an elephant and a round potbelly. This god bestows both wisdom and prosperity.

that this situation might have been caused because I had left our ancestral home, village, relatives and friends.

Hanna was bombarded with Christian messages from all directions, to the point of saturation. She did not mind participating in prayer meetings, but:

I used to tell them, "I am a strong Hindu, and you should not force me to participate in Christian prayer meetings." I used to get into my room and lock it. I felt guilty about it. I wouldn't mind participating in Christian prayer meetings, but I did not want to change my religion. I was sure that, if I participated, they would ask me to receive baptism.

The ambiguity in Hanna's life had become intolerable. She was torn between the loyalty to the ancestral faith of her dead father and the new faith of her dying mother.

In Sri Lanka the Hindu religion gave me peace of mind, but in Holland I didn't get it. I tried to sing Hindu religious songs (*tēvāram*), read prayer books and worship *pillaiyār*, but they did not satisfy my internal quest for peace. I could not worship *pillaiyār* with real devotion (*pakti*), and did not know why. (...) I used to tell myself, "I do not get satisfaction in Hinduism because of this hallelujah group; they come and shout alleluias and I am unable to pray."

In her religious quest for peace of mind Hanna tried to become a refugee in the inner castle of herself:

I remember reading about a religious devotee named Poosalar [Poosalar Nayanar] who wanted to build a Hindu temple but could not afford it. So he decided to build a Hindu temple within his mind, and worship. I tried to do it myself, but it did not work with me. I could not perform or concentrate on any Hindu religious practices. The day I stepped into my sister's house I lost my Hindu religion. (...)

I told you that I lived without peace of mind because I did not have access to a Hindu temple. I even thought that I had made a mistake in coming to Holland, because there was no peace in me. Though there was war in Sri Lanka, we had the *maṇa camātāṇam* (inner peace), which I did not get in Holland. I requested my sisters [Mary had come from London to attend her mother's funeral] to be allowed to return to Sri Lanka.

Hanna's tenacity was no match to Mary's apostolic zeal:

One day I thought I should read the Bible and pray to see why everyone was talking about Christianity. When I read the Bible and prayed I felt a

new kind of *maṇa camātāṇam* within me. I continued reading the Bible, and listened to Christian songs without my sister's knowledge. (...) My brother told me to throw the *pillaiyār* picture into the rubbish bin. I would have scolded him if he had told me this few months earlier; but now I didn't mind throwing the picture away. I regained the *maṇa camātāṇam* and satisfaction once again.

Hanna went to London to live with her 'apostolic' sister Mary. There she received baptism in 1996. At the end of the interview Hanna went back - with some nostalgia - to talk about the peace she once found in Hindu religious practices, to conclude with words similar to the conclusion of other stories:

God has a plan for me. He made use of life situations to grant salvation from everything.

What is *camātāṇam*? We translate it by 'peace,' but then we must add some qualifications. In the minds of many, peace is equivalent to the absence of war, the result of victory, and the imposition of the law of the conqueror upon the conquered. This is usually not what Tamils mean by *camātāṇam*. This definition considers the state of war as the normal state in human relations. Often also peace is considered as the interval between two wars; it is a time of creative and refreshing activity, and also a preparation for another war. This of course is not what Tamils mean by *camātāṇam*. Singam confesses with nostalgia that "though I didn't have money in Sri Lanka, I had *maṇa camātāṇam* that is not available in the UK." Vimalan, the former fisherman, with only elementary schooling, establishes the same relation between "loneliness" and "peace of mind." One would expect that the opposite of loneliness is company, but it is not so in the minds of many Tamils. Vimalan states:

Sri Lankan people in the United Kingdom live in loneliness. They have no entertainment. Starting a new life in another country is not an easy task. When people go through difficult times in their lives and are invited to a place where they think that they can get peace of mind, they just come to see what is happening. Once they realise the presence of the Holy Spirit, they accept Jesus as their personal saviour.

The Tamil *camātāṇam*/*maṇa camātāṇam* could be translated as "the feeling and the state of wholeness of the self, in harmony with the whole." Often one can hear the expression of "peace and consonance" as synonymous terms: peace is just consonance with the whole. By whole we mean the natural realm (cosmic harmony), the social realm (social harmony), and the supernatural realm (religious harmony); the three must go together in a single whole.

When the interviewed refugees have a glance at their lives back there, when they enjoyed peace, they often view it in this sequence, or similar:

- 1) Once I had inner peace in Sri Lanka, in spite of “the problems” (the war);
- 2) I found no-peace in London;
- 3) I have finally found a new inner peace in my belonging to a Christian community.

Mary - Hanna’s elder sister - wanted to believe in Jesus, but not in “human traditions”; she insists that every time she goes to a religious service she feels “peace and satisfaction” within herself:

Here I wanted to live like a Tamil woman, but did not know how to do it in a different cultural set-up. (...) I came to know about English classes for Sri Lankans. I registered my name and in the class I met several Sri Lankans. One girl became very friendly with me. She invited me to her home, and there I met another girl who was a Christian, a convert from Hinduism. (...) She invited me to go to her church. I went with her (...) and in the service I felt the presence of God. I experienced some kind of *maṇa camātāṇam* (inner peace) and happiness throughout the service.

Jothi loved and organised parties and get-togethers to overcome her feeling of loneliness. She thought that having fun is “the real meaning and purpose in life.” She was left disappointed and empty.

I had never read the Bible before, but then I started reading the Bible and found myself strengthened and encouraged by the verses. I felt a kind of *maṇa camātāṇam* within me. On the one side, the parties went on as usual; but on the other side I was experiencing a new awareness and spiritual awakening in my life.

Sinathurai also states that “the church services gave me inner peace.” Perhaps the most restless of all the Tamil refugees interviewed is Chandran. He was chaotically entangled in family problem. At the end of the first interview Chandran said:

It was a big problem within our family [a pause]. *camātāṇam illai* (no peace) [a pause]. (...) I go to the church to get some *maṇa camātāṇam*. The whole week I go through a hard life. At least if I go to church I get some *maṇa camātāṇam* and satisfaction.

For some refugees, Jothi, Mary and Suriya, converted to the Christian community, God has already solved all their problems, and now they enjoy “peace and satisfaction.” They look backwards in gratitude to God. Some others like Swarnan, Chandran and Sinathurai on the other hand, though they find some “peace and satisfaction,” are still looking forwards in hope that God will solve all his entangled problems.

3.11 CONCLUSION

With the data at hand, we may safely conclude that Sri Lankan Tamil refugees are not only the children of the war; we could say also that they carry a war within themselves in their lives in exile; they find no inner peace, only turmoil and conflict between opposing cultures, interests, values and codes of conduct; also a conflict between their expectations of the new reality on the one hand, and the expectations of the new social reality around them on the other: a conflict between promise and fulfilment, between expectations and achievements. In a situation of war, all norms and values are denied or temporarily suspended. After overcoming the shock of disintegration of their families and villages, in London they have found themselves in a state of ‘culture shock’; when prolonged without a satisfactory solution, this state has led to their anomic state. The centre of their lives has been shifted or totally removed.⁶⁴ In London they cannot find that centre, they have to create it, but it is impossible to do so individually; hence the longing and quest for community. In the new social and cultural environment they feel lonely, confused, living aimless lives, under the spell of ‘anomic terror’.

There are many ways to escape anomic terror. Insanity is one, and even suicide which is an extreme case of insanity. If the state of *anomie* is a pre-disposition to suicide (Durkheim)⁶⁵, we contend also, in this chapter, that the anomic state of Tamil refugees living in London may also be, for a good number of them, a pre-disposition and one of the main factors to

⁶⁴ See Durkheim, Emile, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, *op.cit.*, p. 252.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

‘change of religion.’⁶⁶ If suicide is a refusal to cope with reality in desperation, religious conversion is the attempt to join an alternative way to cope with reality in hope. As we shall see in the next chapter, the dramatic aspect of religious conversion has served as therapy to the converts in a time of disintegration of the self. The integration of the person into a new community, with new loyalties and commitments, has had a profound healing effect, not only in the spiritual realm, but also in all other aspects of daily life, taken together in one single whole. The experience also has had the power to achieve a re-integration and consequent wholeness of the personality; by creating a new community, they have created a new home in the provisional home.

⁶⁶ I am not the first one to recognise the intimate connection between the state of *anomie* and religious conversion. As far back as 1960 Renato Poblete and Thomas D. O’Dea conducted a research among Puerto Ricans in New York and published their findings in “*Anomie* and the ‘Quest for Community’: The Formation of Sects among the Puerto Ricans of New York,” in *American Catholic Sociological Review*. Vol. 21, Spring 1960s, pp.18-36. Likewise, Herve Carrier also said that religious belonging “counteracts tendencies toward *anomie*.” See Carrier, Herve, *The Sociology of Religious Belonging*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1965, p. 111.

CHAPTER 4:

FROM ANOMIE TO REINTEGRATION

4.1 EXPLANATORY INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter we attempted to see Tamil refugees in London as they saw themselves. We endeavoured to understand their world as they understood it; but soon we discovered that, when looking at their surrounding world and at themselves immersed in it, almost all and each one concludes that “I do not understand it,” “it has no meaning.” If they do not understand their own world, the researcher cannot understand it either, and cannot honestly bring understanding from elsewhere. Such an understanding must come from within the Tamil communities themselves. According to my interviewees, their former world in their villages was a universe of meaning and order, with harmonious relationships with the natural order of things, with their immediate and extended families as well as friends and acquaintances (the social order), and with the supernatural order that incides and permeates the social and the natural realms. They lived in their own *kalāccāram*, a world where all things were as they should be, a *cosmos*. And this sense of living in a cosmos, their own cosmos, produced in them ‘inner peace’ and ‘satisfaction’.

But now in London, they are suddenly immersed in somebody else’s cosmos that is not familiar to them; somebody else’s cosmos may be for me a chaos if I lack the key to understand it. The sense of living in a chaos produces chaos in the mind, in the heart and the will. The sense of being immersed in a chaos produced in the Tamil refugees a shock, a prolonged culture shock that led them to a state of anomie: different myths that should give meaning to one’s life, but for refugees make no sense; different rituals that correspond to the myths of others; different values and codes of conduct that have no evident basis on their own living reality, and no connection with their myths and rituals. Here in London nothing is familiar, everything is strange, and they are all strangers to each other, and this is “dog’s life.” So the former *cosmos* has become *chaos*, and we saw Tamils living under the spell of *anomie*. Most of my interviewees state, in one way or other, that at one point in their lives in London they “hit the bottom” (Satha) and had reached a ‘turning point’ (*mārṇam*) for the salvation of their lives. We tried to accompany them in their dark night of the soul to explore with them the depth of their

darkness, and we saw only darkness, a picture of no-hope. The picture was very gloomy indeed.

In this chapter we are crossing with them the threshold of the Tamil churches in London. The picture suddenly brightens; we see the same refugees relating to other Tamil refugees with the familiar and affective terms they used in their villages: ‘elder brother’ (*aṇṇai*), ‘elder sister’ (*akkā*), elderly woman (*ammā* [mother]), elderly man (*iya*), ‘bosom friend’ (*maccāṇ*) and so forth. In my participatory observation in the religious services on Sundays I was surprised by a sense of liveliness, spontaneity, purpose, joy and laughter, mutual support in tribulation and general joy in celebration, evident in all and each of the communities I visited. Their formerly disintegrated lives seem to be reintegrated in the new matrix of a newly created “supporting community”¹. Something of transcendental importance had evidently happened in their lives. Previously they felt only the absence of everything that gave meaning, purpose and direction to their lives, without which life is not worth living. Now they give evidence that they are discovering and pursuing the meaning, purpose, direction and final destination of their lives in exile. Many of those who had been helped in the past are now helpers of others, and not infrequently I have heard them quote the statement that “it is more blessed to give than to receive.”² The main purpose of this chapter is the endeavour to **understand the reintegrated life of Tamil refugees and the process and events that made this reintegration possible** by founding new religious communities or joining some of those in existence. In other words, we shall focus our attention to the **nature and extent of their religious conversion** from their former folk Hinduism as practised by them in Sri Lanka to their present Pentecostal Christianity as practised now in London; now and only now can we discover that their religious conversion or ‘change of religion’ has permeated all spheres of their lives, and one has the feeling that their religious affections are more important than their religious opinions. In all events, their ‘change of religion’ has led them to a ‘change of life.’

The reader is aware that we use the term ‘conversion’ and the expressions ‘religious conversion’ and ‘conversion experience’ with some trepidation. The term ‘conversion’ (*iraṭcippu*) is often heard from the pulpit in the rather stereotyped appeals to conversion; it is also heard in the public ‘testimonies of conversion’ of the neophytes, loaded with

¹ O’Rourke, David K., “The Experience of Conversion” in Eigo, Francis A. (ed.), *The Human Experience of Conversion: Persons and Structures in Transformation*. Pennsylvania: The Villanova University Press, 1987, p. 8.

² Acts 20.35 (RSV).

emotional charge. But the Tamil converts themselves never use it in a positive way, and even *iraṭcippu* is used with traces of resentment both in the expression and the tone of voice, as we anticipated in our Introduction, especially in the cases of Jothi and Chandran: They just do not like being called converts or describe their experience as conversion. If by conversion we mean “a change from one [religious] institution to another” (Chandran), it is too cheap; it just means to discover a new world of meaning, and then “embrace the new world” and renounce the former one,³ something that Chandran has done several times in his life, and everyone else does in the development of life: change of opinions, of profession, of affiliation to a club, and so forth. It seems that Tamil refugees who have decided to incorporate themselves in the Christian community of the Pentecostal assembly have undergone a double exodus, one external, and the other internal. The external exodus away from the ancestral homeland to an unknown land was determined - mainly but not exclusively - by external forces that impelled them to seek security away from constant danger, and freedom away from a life in fear. The internal exodus away from the ancestral religion of kin and family was determined - mainly but not exclusively - by internal spiritual urges that impelled them to seek an alternative world view, a different system of symbols and a new joyful community by ways of incorporation and participation in their respective Tamil Churches. Chandran also gives us a hint of the deeper, full meaning of conversion as “realisation of the supernatural power” within ourselves. Indeed, a cursory look at the entry “conversion” in any dictionary will define it - more or less - as “a generic term for change and generally implies a drastic alteration of a former state.”⁴ This is applicable in chemistry, mathematics, economics, architecture, politics and computer systems; it is also applicable to institutions, whether religious or otherwise. Chandran rejects this concept if applied to religious experience; it seems too cheap for him. In Chandran’s remarks, ‘conversion’ does not touch only the spiritual or religious affections,⁵ leaving the rest untouched; at one point of our conversations he observes: “My name has been changed, but I have not changed.” The word ‘conversion,’ for Chandran, would be justified only if it permeates and empowers the totality of human life: conversion, for

³ Barker, Irwin R. & Currie, Raymond F., “Do Converts Always Make the Most Committed Christians?” in *Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion*. Vol. 24, #3, p. 305. See also Travisano, Richard V., “Alternation and Conversion as Qualitatively Different Transformations” in Stone, Gregory P & Faberman, Harvey A (eds.). *Social Psychology Through Symbolic Interaction*. Waltham, Mass.: Xerox College Publishing, 1970, p. 601.

⁴ Salzman, Leon, “Types of Religious conversion” in *Pastoral Psychology*. Vol. 17, September 1966, p. 10.

⁵ O’Rourke, David K., “The Experience of Conversion,” *op.cit.*, p. 8.

Chandran, would be the full realisation of all the potentialities inherent in human life; in psychological parlance, it is commonly called 'self-realisation.'

In this chapter we shall concentrate our attention on the event and the process of religious conversion; but we can not isolate and insulate these cases in order to analyse them under a microscope in a 'pure' form; conversion comes within a biographical environment, and every biography is also part of a wider social environment of many biographies that overlap into each other forming a kind of social, cultural and spiritual web; it will not be possible to understand a human phenomenon without due attention paid to the immediate surrounding environment. In every event we have an antecedent, some concomitants, and a consequent; in the previous chapters we have attempted to understand the immediate antecedent (the state of anomie in London) and the remote antecedent of disintegration of their familiar cosmos; in this chapter we shall attempt to understand the event itself, together with some of its concomitants, as well as some important consequence, such as the therapeutic and reintegrative effects⁶ of individual personalities in their association to form Tamil Christian communities.

When one hears or reads testimonies of conversion - whether lengthy like St. Augustine's⁷ or C. S. Lewis's⁸, or short and sudden like St. Paul's⁹ or John Wesley's¹⁰ - one immediately recognises superimposed layers of theological interpretation in the narratives, more or less skilfully verbalised. Often nowadays the interpretation of the event of 'conversion' is something learned from the official rhetoric of the group; otherwise it is difficult to explain the repetitive explanation, with the same words, that the researcher has heard in different houses of interviewees: "and then I received Jesus in my heart as my personal Lord and Saviour" (Chandran, Ganesh, Swarnan). If we try to peel back the experience of religious conversion to free it of those superimposed layers, we may find ourselves peeling an onion in our quest of the essence of the onion, or we may find a sweet treasure in the very heart, like in the peeling of a coconut. Though the outward manifestations of the conversion experience are similar, we must recognise that

⁶For a more technical treatment of this scheme see Nilsen, E. Anker, *Religion and Personality Integration*. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1980.

⁷ See O'Connell, Robert J., *St. Augustine's Confessions: The Odyssey of Soul*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1969.

⁸ See Lewis, C. S., *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*. London: G. Bles, 1955.

⁹ Acts 22: 6-21 (RSV).

¹⁰ See also Koerber, Charles J., *The Theology of Conversion According to John Wesley*. New York: University of Georgia, 1967.

each individual conversion is unique,¹¹ that not all conversions are equally traumatic, and that not all converts are eager to share their experience or verbalise it.

There is a common substratum among almost all the conversion experiences that Tamils in London shared with me and verbalised for my information, recording and future study; when stripped of all theological trappings impossible to verify empirically, this seems to be the sequence that I put in non-technical terms:

- 1) ... and then I hit the bottom (loneliness, meaninglessness, no-peace – Singam, Ganesh, Swarnan);
- 2) ... and then I saw a friendly hand (friend, relative, or other converts – Singam, Ganesh, Swarnan, Jothi, Mary);
- 3) ... and I grasped that hand with all my strength (invitation to attend the Tamil church – Ganesh, Singam, Mary, Sinathurai);
- 4) ... and then I went with him/her to the new community (exposure to the Tamil church – Ganesh, Vimalan, Satha, Mary, Hanna, Ratnam);
- 5) ... and I liked the people, but not the worship service (friendliness, acceptance, support, but also shouting and clapping without any evident meaning – Jothi, Hanna);
- 6) ... and I became familiar with the worship and the people (Jothi, Hanna);
- 7) ... and the people encouraged me to take the decisive step (Swarnan, Mary, Jothi, Hanna, Sinathurai, Singam);
- 8) ... and one day I decided to be baptised. (Swarnan, Sinathurai, Singam)
- 9) ... (and one day I also spoke in tongues) (Saro, Jeya, Satha).
- 10) ... Now I can face all the problems with courage and determination (Ganesh, Jothi, Sinathurai, Swarnan).

With the exception of number nine ('baptism in the Spirit' evidenced by the speaking of tongues), which is not common to all and usually comes wrapped in a theological interpretation, this is the sequence of the process in the majority of the cases, in this same sequential order; some interviewees emphasise one point over the others, but in fact all the points are usually present. Later, after the event and upon reflection, dialogue, and even indoctrination about the event, people describe it in theological terms. I found no incident of a sudden, drastic and definitive 'conversion' as we can find in so many classical narratives. Most cases imply a long process with questionings and hesitations, that are still going on after the initial euphoria, and we can even say that the posterior

¹¹ Sladanha, Julian, "Patterns of Conversion in Indian Mission History" in Mattam, Joseph & Kim, Sebastian. (eds.), *Mission and Conversion A Reappraisal*. Mumbai: St Pauls, 1996, p. 95.

theological interpretation of converts “in conversation with the entire believing community”¹² is also part of the whole process of religious conversion; in other words, conversion is an event plus its interpretation, and the interpretation is part of the event. Even though the interviewees may begin their testimonies with a theological interpretation, we know that their way of narrating their conversion story is “a product of the interactions among the convert’s aspirations, needs and orientations”¹³; in the converts’ mind, their drastic change in religion and of religion discloses the meaning and purpose of all misfortunes undergone in “the particular social matrix”¹⁴ till the moment of bliss in “experiences of God in all things”¹⁵ through the mediation of their newly adopted religious community that they like to describe as a ‘family’ and sometimes as ‘God’s family.’

In the words of some Asian theologians, “Theology is a wrestling...with its environment”;¹⁶ in the case of our enquiry, the awareness of God’s presence along the whole process comes only at the end, when the struggle is over. This is beautifully illustrated in the story of Jacob’s dream of a ladder reaching up to heaven, and with angels ascending and descending. Then Jacob woke from his dream and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it!”¹⁷. Analogously Tamil converts say that, after all, they had not been left orphans by their gods, that God is also with them (Ganesh), in them (Jothi) and among them (Kumar) in London, and so they are in London for a better purpose (Singam, Hanna, Suriya): “So God was here all the time and I never knew it!” Furthermore, like Jacob, Tamils in a foreign land establish a contractual or covenant relationship of “give and take” in the words of Jacob: “If God will be with me, and will keep me in this journey that I make, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God...”¹⁸. Hindus, like ancient Jews, like to put their God to the test: “if you

¹² Baum, Gregory., “Critical Theology” in Conn, Walter E., *Conversion: Perspectives on Personal and Social Transformation*. New York: Alba House, 1978, p. 281.

¹³ Rambo, Lewis R., *Understanding of Religious Conversion*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993, p. 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁵ Amaladoss, Michael, “The Kingdom, Mission and Conversion” in *Mission and Conversion A Reappraisal*. *op.cit.*, p. 47.

¹⁶ See Anderson, Gerald H., “Introduction” in Anderson Gerald H. (ed.), *Asian Voices in Christian Theology*. New York: Orbis Books, 1976, p. 6.

¹⁷ Genesis 28. 16 (RSV).

¹⁸ Genesis 28: 20-21 (RSV).

are the true god, grant me a visa extension, and I promise that I will receive baptism and change my religion” (Swarnan); or “if you heal my sickness, then I will worship you in this church” (Satha, Sinathurai); “Jesus! you are a living God, save me from this trouble” (Sathivel), and so forth. The discovery of God’s living presence often happens at waking from a dream (Jacob), or after coming out of a nightmare (Tamil refugees); the awareness of his presence, the disclosure of God’s hiddenness, comes, in all cases, after the event.

After this digression, the hounding question emerges again and again: Why is it that conversion to Christianity among Tamil Hindus is so rare and difficult in Sri Lanka, and so frequent and easy in London?

4.2 “IT IS VERY DIFFICULT TO CHANGE RELIGION IN SRI LANKA” (VIMALAN, SURIYA)

At the time of the interview (1997) Suriya was about 18 years old. He spoke with religious fervour about his experiences, mixing his factual recollections with naive theological remarks, quotations from the Bible to nail his statements firmly, and vibrant proclamations of the golden opportunity Christian Tamils have now to announce the truth to those who still “sit in darkness.” His words reveal that he must have been a precocious child in his religious affections and political commitment. He was only 11 years old when he had his first direct encounter with organised Christianity, and only 12 years old when he left Sri Lanka and came to London mainly for fear that his outspoken political involvement with the LTTE might cause problems to himself and his immediate family.

I come from a very strong Hindu family. My grandmother teaches Hinduism in schools. My grandfather makes chariots for Hindu temples. I studied at Hardly College, Point Pedro. I used to lead Hindu worship for the students in the school hall. (...)

In Jaffna the intensity of Hindu religion is strong; social and religious structures are very strong in Jaffna. The power of darkness controls the lives of people there. When I came to Colombo I was able to feel freedom. Colombo is like London, where social structures do not control the lives of people. **I have not heard or seen people becoming Christians in my village of Karaveddy. Why? Hindu religious system is very strong in my village,** and also we do not see Christian preachers coming to our village and preach about Jesus. We need to hear the Word to realise the truth. It didn’t happen in my village, and it can’t happen there. When people leave their traditionally inhabited areas and go to Canada, London and other Western countries, they get a chance to hear the Gospel. **There is no social pressure to hinder their decision making process.** Many

people become Christians in Western countries because they can make decisions on their own, without having to please others or obey orders from elders.

Suriya's recollection of life in the bosom of his family and village is darkened in the contrast with his present light and truth and the enjoyment of "an other worldly love."¹⁹ In his retrospective recollection, the protective and nurturing bosom of family and village has become an oppressive and asphyxiating matrix, regimenting his body and mind and spirit to conform to the tightly integrated cultural pattern, with little or no room for significant change. His 'change of religion' became practically impossible in his village due to a) social pressures (asphyxiation), b) family structure of authority (oppression), c) lack of access to alternative structures of spiritual reality (deprivation). His first encounter with Christianity happened in his first visit to Colombo in 1990, when Suriya was not older than 11 years. There he had an extraordinary religious experience, a 'peak experience,'²⁰ that broke his closed universe wide open and led him to a new evaluation of Christianity and corresponding devaluation of Hinduism; in his own words, he began to see the Hinduism practised by his family and village with new eyes and attitudes. He mentions this spiritual 'peak experience' several times in the interview, stating in each case that it led him to look at Hinduism with critical eyes and at Christianity with favourable eyes, but was not determinant for his change of religion, because of pressure from family and village. Suriya's experience deserve a long quotation:

¹⁹ Lonergan, Bernard J. F., *Method in Theology*. New York: Herder And Herder, 1972, p. 242.

²⁰ I borrow the expression 'peak experience' mainly from Abraham H. Maslow and Gordon W. Allport. A 'peak experience' is a unique event of extreme pleasure, happiness and may be also of pain, that somehow determines the future orientation of one's life; it can be a feat in sports, or academics, or also a religious extasis. Religious conversion is considered generally as a 'peak experience.' Maslow enumerates the beneficial therapeutic effects of peak experiences, and we find that most points are applicable to our interviewees. Maslow writes: "1. Peak experiences may and do have some therapeutic effects in the strict sense of removing symptoms. (...) 2. They can change the person's view of himself in a healthy direction. 3. They can change the view of other people and his relations to them in many ways. 4. They can change more or less permanently his view of the world, or of aspects or parts of it. 5. They can release him for greater creativity, spontaneity, expressiveness, idiosyncrasy. 6. He remembers the experience as a very important and desirable happening and seeks to repeat. 7. The person is more apt to feel that life in general is worth while, even if it is usually drab, pedestrian, painful or ungratifying." See Maslow, Abraham H., *Towards a Psychology of Being*. New York: D. van Nostrand Co., 1962, p. 95.

One day (I think it was Easter Sunday) I went to church with my uncle in Colombo; the pastor of the church divided the church members in groups and asked us to pray for each other. I had never prayed before, and when the people in my group prayed for me, I started crying. I did not know what had happened to me at that point. (...) Something had taken place at that point. I cannot explain this experience in words. (...) Perhaps I can say that I had experienced the presence of the living God at that moment. (...) I do not want to analyse the event using my present commitment to Jesus Christ. (...) I could say that this event made me look at Hinduism differently. I did not question my religion until I had this experience. For me Hinduism satisfied all my religious needs as a Tamil person. (...) So there was no question of searching for truth or anything like that; but in Hindu religion I did not go through and extraordinary experience like this. I practised Hinduism and believed that its gods are true gods, but I never experienced their genuineness within me.

And yet, even so, Suriya concludes saying that, back in his village,

although I had this unusual experience in a Christian church in Colombo, it did not change my religion or my behaviour in any way. I continued as a practising Hindu until 1995. I never thought of attending any churches in London. (...)

Other interviewees point also to family's and village's structured frame as an almost insurmountable obstacle to their religious change. Thus Vimalan, the former fisherman, in his characteristic taciturnity:

It is very difficult to change one's religion in Sri Lanka. My village is a **big community, and people would ridicule anyone who changes his religion.** But I have seen even people who have ridiculed others for changing their religion who have now become Christians in London (...)

By 'big community' Vimalan means the opposite of 'large agglomeration of people.' 'Big' must be understood as strong, tightly integrated, resistant to change. In Vimalan's fishing village there is no anonymity; everybody knows each other, talks about each other, and has a malicious laugh at each other when the opportunity arrives. Vimalan hypothesises that, if someone changes his religious affiliation in his village, he will become the laughingstock of everybody and so condemned to social ostracism, self-estrangement and isolation. In a tightly integrated village, any change in behaviour would be considered a deviant behaviour.

If Vimalan considers the vigilant and peeping eyes of the village and the viperine tongues of its inhabitants as formidable obstacles to the changing of religion, others like

Mary, Hanna and Swarnan, found an equally formidable obstacle in the stern authority of 'Father' in the structuring of the family. For as long as they live in their father's house, they are all subject to his total, undivided and unconditional authority, even if they are legally adults; all must submit to the patriarchal figure and participate in the family rituals. Religious change is facilitated only with the removal of this formidable paternal obstacle, or with the conversion of the father himself, and the subsequent or concomitant conversion of the entire household with him²¹. Let us hear Swarnan first:

My father is a Hindu priest. (...) I need to tell you about my first encounter with the Christian church in Sri Lanka. Earlier I have told you that I lost my first child within few days of his birth. My wife and I were worrying about this event. (...) A friend of us told us that we should go to the Roman Catholic Church, pay homage to the shrine (*curupam*) and place a donation (*kāṇikkai*) in the church stating that, if we did so, God would grant us a child soon [the promised covenant relationship of "give and take" between the god and his worshipper]. So we did, and soon my wife became pregnant and gave birth to a girl. **This event made me gain faith in Christianity. (...) However, I did not become a Christian because my father was a Hindu priest. He was forcing me to continue his vocation by becoming a Hindu priest myself.** He used to tell me that I should abstain from eating meat, which is a proper requirement to receive the training (*tīṭcai*). I was not interested in his vocation. Yet, my father used to scold me saying that God will one day punish our family if he [my priestly father] could not dedicate at least one child to God's service. **I never went again to any Christian churches in order to avoid further confrontations with my father, and I lived as a practising Hindu.** (...) I think Jesus saw me long before I saw him. (...)

Besides the fact of paternal authority as a barrier against the decision to change religion on the part of his children, two other important points appear in this narrative. First, the awareness of the miraculous and the supernatural in the midst of the natural and routine events of life: the healthy birth of children is closely related with the propitious operation of the gods; second, the presence in Sri Lankan villages of 'non-baptised believers in Christ' (often initialised as the NBBC) to use an expression not uncommon among

²¹As in the case of Cornelius the Roman centurion (Acts 10.48) and the jailer of Philippi (Acts 16. 31-33), the most common pattern of conversion in Sri Lankan villages is the simultaneous conversion of the head of the household and the members of the family under him. In London the Tamil family pattern has been changed; many live alone; those who live in family have adopted the pattern of the nuclear family; in these cases the conversion usually entails the entire family; it is rare for a single member to be converted to Christianity while the rest remain attached to Hinduism.

Christian theologians and missiologists in India:²² they believe in Jesus and pray to him, but do not attend Christian churches and receive the sacraments in order to avoid family 'problems.' Swarnan, as well as a good number of Tamil converts in London, lives in the awareness of the miraculous, an important aspect of their spiritual lives, as we shall see later.

Both Mary and her sister Hanna agree that "my father was a strict Hindu"; they seem to disagree on everything else. Yet both sisters are members of the same church in London, with different attitudes and degrees of Christian fervour and commitment. Let us commence with Mary, the apostolic instrument for the conversion of the rest of the family:

I come from a Hindu family. My parents are Hindus, but there are numerous Christian relatives from my mother's side. I had an aunt then living in Colombo, who was a Christian. She showed a special concern for me, and I used to visit her during school holidays. (...) I can say that my aunt was a devoted Christian. She spent a lot of time in prayers and attended all church services. When her daughters went to church, I joined them. **My aunt never asked me to change my religion, but I respected her faith and devotion to Christianity.** (...) My aunt is a very strong lady [meaning strong in will power and determination, not physical strength]. In her youth she went through hard time in her life. She married at the age of 17, and her husband died a few years after marriage, while she was expecting a child. She did not give up the struggle in life; instead, she became a Christian, went to a teacher's training college, and took good care of all her children. Moreover, from her young days she lived an admirable Christian life. (...)

So Mary practised the Christian religion while she was in Colombo with her aunt, unhindered by the stern, prohibitive look of her strict Hindu father. Mary paints for us two interesting portraits: a loveless Father who is a strict Hindu, and a loving Aunt who is a fervid Christian. While Mary was living with her father, she practised Hinduism out of fear; when living with her aunt, she practised Christianity out of love. Mary is exuberant in the praises of her aunt, and has no positive word for her father apart from his rigour and strictness. It seems that Mary also joined the numbers of 'non-baptised believers in Christ.' She continues her story:

²² A similar observation was noted in India by Andrew Wingate in his article "The Secret Christians of Sivakasi, Tamil Nadu: One Pattern of Conversion in a South Indian Town." In *Religion and Society*. Vol. XXXIII, #1, March 1986, pp. 73-87.

When I went home from my holidays I forgot all my Christian involvement in Colombo and practised Hinduism. My father was a very strict Hindu. **He would not tolerate any other religious involvement** (...) One day I remember asking my aunt to tell me more about Christianity; but she said that **she would not talk about religion with me, because my father would accuse her if he came to know that I was interested in Christianity.**

Hanna's picture of their father is not so ogre-like. But whether an ogre or not, he evidently was authoritarian and traditionalist. In whatever way we look at him, he was certainly an insurmountable obstacle for his several children (one son and four daughters) to change the religion of their ancestors. Mary continues:

I did my G. C. E. (O/L) examination in 1980 and came to live with my aunt permanently. (...) In a few months I got a job in Colombo, left my aunt's house, and moved to Borella Roman Catholic convent hostel. (...) I went to different churches in Colombo. (...) I do not know why I went to churches, but whenever I had the time I went to a church. My life in Colombo was a religious mixture. I went to temples to practise Hinduism, and also attended Christian services. Also there were some elements in Christianity that attracted me: Saint Anthony's Church in Kochchicade impressed me a lot; I was told that Saint Anthony performed miracles in his worshippers' lives (...)

Mary's narrative reveals, that she was torn between her father and village tradition on the one hand, and her new found freedom of choice to change her religion on the other. In her story we can detect three important aspects that recur in the stories of my interviewees: a) a kind of dual loyalty; b) progressive disenchantment with Hinduism, but not total repudiation of it; c) the pursuit of the miraculous in the midst of every day's life. She concludes this section of her story:

Then my aunt migrated to London (...) I felt that I was left alone in Colombo. I wrote to my aunt saying that I also wanted to go to London. I started to attend more church services and prayed that I should be given a chance to join my aunt in London. (...) In 1985 the UK government adopted an open visa policy and allowed Sri Lankans to enter the United Kingdom. I think it was God's plan that I should come to London. **My faith in Christian religion grew after that miracle. Yet, I did not become a Christian.**

In her disenchantment with her father, Mary took refuge under the protective shelter of her aunt; in her disenchantment with her father's Hinduism, she took refuge in the protective and miraculous devotion to a variety of folk Catholicism; later in London she became disenchanted with her aunt and took refuge in the company of a fellow student,

friend and companion; finally she took refuge in the All-Tamil Pentecostal Church in London. Mary concludes this section with admirable laconism:

My father died in 1992.

Immediately after this utterance, Mary lightens up and tells how the rest of her family became Christians: mother, brother and three sisters, all Christians like herself, in London, Holland and Canada. Mary's sister Hanna has an almost symmetrical story, with a kind of inverted symmetry. We met her in the previous chapter narrating how she was a devout Hindu and a fervid devotee of the Hindu god *pillaiyār*, and how she enjoyed peace of mind and inner peace back in Sri Lanka, how she was overwhelmed under an ideological bombardment from her sister in London, her two sisters in Holland and Canada, her dying mother and her brother who had become a Pentecostal pastor. Even after her surrender and 'change of religion,' she ended the interview with an outburst of anger and resentment that she could no longer repress. Her outburst is worth repeating:

Hanna: I told you that I was a fervent believer of *pillaiyār*, and spent a lot of time in the temple that was in front of our house. I wanted to observe my religion with all its ceremonies, but I could not perform even one because my sister cooked meat every day in her house. How can it be possible to observe fasting and other religious practices when they act in an anti-Hindu manner at home? (...) I was busy in Sri Lanka and had friends and relatives; even that was refused to me. I really missed temple worship. Still I do not know why I could not worship my god *pillaiyār* in my room. (...)

But this is the end of her confessions to me, after her struggle in Holland and London and her eventual surrender to change her religion and receive baptism. Let us now turn to the beginning of her story in Sri Lanka. By the time of the beginning of the story, Hanna's sister (Mary) is already in London and has become a Christian. This is the beginning of Hanna's story:

I was a strong Hindu in Sri Lanka. My sister, who was in London, had become a Christian and started sending to us Christian pamphlets and magazines. I was a devotee of the Hindu god *pillaiyār*; so I did not read any Christian literature, but at the same time I felt odd to throw them into the dustbin. So I collected all the Christian books sent by my sister and kept them in a corner. Once in a while I gave them to a Christian teacher who lived close to our house. (...)

Hanna almost accused her sister of insanity for changing her religion. Thus she proceeds:

After my father's death in 1992, my mother went to live with my sister in Holland. I was close to my mother, but could not get a visa to go to

Holland. (...) After my mother left Sri Lanka, I became a very religious person. My sister in London wrote several letters asking us to become Christians. We used to laugh at her letters and say, “**she must have become a schizophrenic in London.**”

Hanna decided to go to Colombo to wait for a visa.

I went to Colombo in 1994 because my sister in Holland had written to me saying that she could now try to work out a visa for me to enter Holland. I stayed in Colombo until 1995. In Colombo, too, I visited all the Hindu temples and lived as a practising Hindu. The religious change of my mother, sisters and brother produced an unusual kind of fear within me. I felt that all of them had deserted our traditional religion (*pārampariya camayam*), which was equivalent to betraying Tamilhood (*tamiḷ pārampariyam*). I decided that I should not change my religion at any cost.

Hanna postulates a new, strong reason for not shifting the ancestral religious paradigm: it is equivalent to a desertion, betrayal and treason against Tamilhood (*tamiḷ pārampariyam*). Implicit is the idea that Hindu religion is con-natural with Tamil identity and *kalāccāram*. Hinduism - in the mind of Hanna and the minds of others like her - is the very fabric, foundation and axis of Tamil *kalāccāram* and nationhood.²³ Remove Hinduism, and the entire fabric collapses. Is Hanna right? Some Hindu Tamil authors say ‘yes’; Tamil converts in London claim that she is wrong and endeavour to retain Tamil identity while ‘changing their religion’.

Satha gives us another reason why he did not become a Christian in Sri Lanka, though he had a direct exposure to Christianity for several years as an adolescent.

I studied in Jaffna Central College. Then we had separate worship services for Hindus and Christians. Worship for Christian students was conducted at Saint Peter’s Methodist Church, which was located just outside the school premises. Several Hindu students, when late for school, joined the Christian worship in order to avoid the punishment given to late comers. After a few weeks, one could understand the pattern of Christian worship. I went to Christian worship several times. So I knew how Christians worship before I came to London. I did not become a Christian in Jaffna because there was no challenge for joining Christianity at that point.

²³ Sivathamby states that “Siva-Tamil ideology is that social concept that is rooted in the intellectual and cultural conviction that Saivaism and Tamil are essential to each other in determining each other’s basic characteristic, and that it would be impossible to have one existence (either as a Tamil or a Saivaite) without also being the other (Saivaite Tamil).” Sivathamby, K., *Sri Lankan Tamil society and Politics. op.cit.*, p. 64.

The Tamil word that we translate as ‘challenge’ is *cavāl*. This word in Satha’s sentence suggests that Christian worship services were not stimulating enough to attend them voluntarily, and the Christian worshipping community was not stimulating enough to make it worth the while joining it and going through the problems of ‘changing religion.’ If my reflection on Satha’s words is correct, one of the most formidable obstacles to joining the Christian worshipping communities in Sri Lanka lies in the Christian communities themselves: their boring and uninteresting enactment of repetitive rituals, always the same, a routine without evident content. One of the reasons for the phenomenal growth of Tamil Pentecostalism in London, by contrast, may lie in the enthusiasm, vigour and liveliness of the communities.

These seem to be the most important hindrances to change religion, as voiced by some of my interviewees, and join Christianity:

- a) The tight structure of the family, with total authority concentrated in the figure of the Father (Suriya, Mary, Swarnan).
- b) The tight integration of the village that hardly tolerated a deviant behaviour of an individual or sub-group. (Vimalan, Suriya).
- c) The practical identity of Hinduism with Tamil *kalāccāram*, so that the abandonment of Hinduism is tantamount to betraying Tamilhood (Hanna).
- d) The boringness of the Christian worshipping community that makes the Christian churches too unattractive to make it worth the trouble of abandoning Hinduism to join such an alternative worshipping community. (Satha)

We do not claim for these few testimonies any sociological statistical significance beyond the group under study, and we can say that we have discovered what we already knew. But we considered the hindrances to ‘change religion’ in Sri Lanka worth mentioning; once those obstacles have been removed, religious conversion may become easier and more frequent, or at least less difficult; but our findings do not suggest that, with the disenchantment with Hinduism, conversion to Christianity will be easier. And in London, why do Tamils not join the mainline varieties of Christianity (Anglican, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Baptist), and decide (mainly) to join the ‘fringe sects’²⁴ of

²⁴Our use of the word ‘sect’ is purely technical and has no pejorative connotations whatsoever; we attach to it the meaning given by Ernst Troelsch in his work *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*; see our remark on this in Chapter 5.

Christianity? Is it because they constitute a 'fringe ethnic community'? We shall try to answer this question in our final chapter.

4.3 "MY FAITH IN THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION GREW AFTER THIS MIRACLE" (MARY)

An important part of Sri Lankan popular religiosity, both in Hinduism and Catholicism, is what we may call the 'pursuit of the miraculous' in the worshipping of 'miraculous' gods and saints, pilgrimages and, occasionally, visits to consult holy men and omens. We do not want to impose our theological meaning of 'miracle,' but to expose the meaning of *arputam* that emerges from the testimonies of our interviewees; ours will be a method of 'exegesis,' taking the meaning out of the text, and not imposing on the text our own meanings and ideas. This precaution may be needed in view of the widespread opinion (reinforced by some mass rally Christian evangelists) that the performance of miraculous acts of healing and other similar spectacular events may lead people to be converted and to accept Jesus in their hearts as their personal Lord and Saviour, simplistic as it may look.

Some of my informants were somehow attracted to Roman Catholic churches because Saint Anthony or *Mātā* performed miracles in response to fervent prayers.²⁵ While Mary was in Colombo in 1985, she attended both Hindu *kōvil* and Christian churches, as we saw above. At one point she remarks:

There were some elements in Christianity that attracted me. Saint Anthony's Church in Kochchicade impressed me a lot. I was told that Saint Anthony performed miracles in the worshippers' lives. (...)

Mary gave credit to the reports of miraculous events, but she was not in pursuit of the miraculous herself; miracles fill people with wonder, but usually are not determinant for their religious conversion; those miracles did not produce faith in Mary, only a strong curiosity and 'attraction.' Eventually Mary herself would be the beneficiary of a

²⁵Though I am referring to rural Tamils in Sri Lanka, I find a good deal of inspiration in the comparison and contrast of the same phenomenon in rural Tamil Nadu in India. For a serious study of this subject, the reader may consult Mosse, David: "Catholic Saints and the Hindu Village Pantheon in Rural Tamil Nadu, India" in *Man: The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*. Vol. 29, #2, June 1994. Analogously, Stirrat's study among Roman Catholic Christians in Sri Lanka pointed out that several of them attended Hindu and Buddhist temples, went to consult astrologists, while remaining Roman Catholics. Stirrat, R. L., *Power and Religiosity in a Post-Colonial Setting: Sinhala Catholics in Contemporary Sri Lanka*, op.cit., p. 181.

miraculous intervention, when she was left alone in Colombo after her aunt's emigration to London. We repeat a section of her testimony:

Then my aunt migrated to London (...) I felt that I was left alone in Colombo. I wrote to my aunt saying that I too wanted to go to London. I started attending more church services and prayed that I should be given a chance to join my aunt in London. (...)

In 1985 the UK government adopted an open visa policy and allowed Sri Lankans to enter the United Kingdom. I think it was God's plan that I should come to London. **My faith in the Christian religion grew after this miracle. Yet, I did not become a Christian.** (Emphasis added).

Here we see a perfectly natural event, if we look at it objectively. But in Mary's spiritual predicament at the time there were several subjective conditions that induced her to interpret the natural in terms of the supernatural intervention:

1. Her incipient faith.
2. Prayer in her need, that would be senseless without faith.
3. The event that made it possible for Mary to solve her problem.
4. Interpretation of the event as a response to her fervent prayer.
5. A name for that response: Divine intervention, a miracle.
6. Result: My faith in the Christian religion was strengthened because of this miracle.
7. Reference to conversion: "Yet, I did not become a Christian."

From Mary's case and words we can define *arputam* as 'a sign of God's favour towards his worshippers, that he manifests by granting their petitions.' A 'miracle' in the mind of Tamils is not necessarily a contradiction or provisional suspension of the natural laws by the God who created nature and imposed it his laws. The miraculous character of the event is perceived by faith and serves to strengthen incipient faith; as such it is a theological interpretation of otherwise natural events. The frequent mention of *arputam* in our conversations indicates that, for the Sri Lankan Tamil mind, there is no precise distinction between the natural and supernatural realms.²⁶ The natural is pervaded with the supernatural, and God's propitious (or unpropitious) intervention can be seen in

²⁶ See subsection "Vows and Kavadi" in Holmes, W Robert, *Jaffna (Sri Lanka) 1980. op.cit.*, pp. 157-59.

miraculous rewards to those who worship him²⁷ and also in miraculous punishments to those who despise him. But in no case is *arputam* determinant for changing of religion.

The most common petitions to the gods, Saint Anthony, *Mātā* and other saints are for: 1) the gift of children; 2) granting of legal documents; 3) deliverance from ‘problems’ (jobs, sickness, lack of funds to help relatives, etc.). In the case of Swarnan and his wife we can see:

1. The need: They have been married for some time, but have no children.
2. A friend suggested they should make a vow for children in a particular Roman Catholic Church.
3. Swarnan and wife believed their friend and made the vow with fervent prayer.
4. Event: Few weeks later Swarnan’s wife conceived a child.
5. Theological interpretation after the event: This is an *arputam* that shows that the Christian God is powerful.
6. Relation to conversion: “I did not become a Christian because my father was a Hindu priest.”

Swarnan’s life seems saturated by the presence of the numinous. In Sri Lanka he lived in his father’s house, and the house was within the precincts of the *kōvil*, thus participating – physically and spiritually – in the realm of the sacred. He attended daily the religious observances of the Hindu *kōvil*, and occasionally also the Catholic church, without his father’s knowledge; in London he attends the Pentecostal church weekly, and also the Hindu *kōvil* and the Catholic church, without his pastor’s knowledge. He performs numerous meritorious works in the hope of being rewarded, and avoids offending the gods for fear of being punished:

Although I lost my first child, Jesus gave me three lovely daughters.
I saw how God punished a shop owner who did not entertain
Christian workers who had come to tell him about Jesus. His shop and
house were destroyed in an air raid.
I have made a collection box, and put coins in it every day; once it is
filled, I will give it to the church. I am sure that God will reward me
for this. (...) Every morning, before I go to work, I pray and put some
money in the till I had made. Whatever loose coins I have, I put them
in the till; once the till is full, I believe that all my problems will be
solved. (...)

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

Bargaining with God is not uncommon among Tamils, both Hindus and Christians. Swarnan:

I did not want to receive baptism because I was afraid that my Hindu gods would get angry if I became a Christian. I attended the church regularly, listened to the sermons, but did not receive baptism. I had not got a long visa in the UK. I prayed to Jesus: "If you grant me a long term visa, then I will receive baptism." Some church members told me that I was putting God to the test.

As in the case of Chandran (to be mentioned later), Swarnan learned that we must do the will of God first, and not expect that God to do our will because of bargaining:

The Home Office informed me that my asylum application had been rejected and that I should leave the country on a particular day. I went to the pastor. He and the entire congregation prayed for me (...) I was given a one-month extension. The church members told me that I should receive baptism. I received baptism and was given another six months visa. (...) I believe that God has instigated this extension. God will not allow me to go back to Sri Lanka. (...) I have lots of responsibilities for my family. God is the only hope for me to face those responsibilities. (...) God cannot help me if I say that I know God and do not trust him. I need to trust him and then I can experience deliverance and miracles. (...)

The Tamil word for 'faith' is *nampikkai*. Tamils do not make any distinction between 'faith' as assent of the heart ('trust') and 'faith' as consent of the mind ('belief'); the same word *nampikkai* is used by the interviewees for 'faith,' 'trust,' 'confidence' and 'belief.' Only when you are moved by *nampikkai* you can obtain deliverance (*viṭutalai*) from worries, miracles, and 'guidance' (*vaḷi naṭattal*). Jothi also experienced the presence of the supernatural in the ordinary realities of life. Like in so many stories of conversion, she remembers the exact date when it occurred:

Slowly I came out of the life that I had been enjoying for the past six years. The climax of all the events that changed my life completely came on February 1997. I wanted to go to India on a holiday during April 1997 to see my mother and friends. I also needed a break from my burdensome, heavy load work. But I didn't have the money nor leave from the office; besides, my husband didn't want me to go. I don't know whether I was testing God on this, but I prayed about it. I asked God to help me to go to India. I think I read the Bible more meaningfully during those days. God spoke to me over and over again through the Bible verses ("Fear not..." etc.). Everything worked out well for me. I was able to organise finances, got holiday leave, and even I could book my air ticket during the summer rush season. I would say it was a miracle. When I left for India I prayed and thanked God for

this miracle. (...) Whenever I have a problem, I ask God to be at my side and help me.

Tamils, Hindus and Christians alike, seek a prolongation of themselves in their own progeny. Children are considered as the greatest blessing of God; conception and childbirth are accompanied with more or less elaborate rituals of thanksgiving. Children are a sign of divine favour, and as such can be considered as miracles; the withdrawal of children (through barrenness, miscarriage or premature death) is often considered as a sign of God's displeasure. Mary's moving testimony deserves a long quotation:

Jesus has always been good to my family. (...) Yet, we were not faithful to him until he gave us little punishments and corrected our ways. We bought a house, a car and other worldly things, and wanted to have more and more things for us. Suddenly we faced a financial crisis, and our house was taken over by the Mortgage Company. At that point we realised that it was a warning and punishment from God to show our worldly desires. We corrected our ways, and our faith in Jesus has grown. (...)

It looks like a replica of Job's story in the Bible. Mary continues:

We also lost three children due to premature births. When I lost the third baby I said to God that I could not bear this punishment any more, that he should forgive us and give us another chance. (...) The doctor that looked after me said that I may not have any more children in the future. But a nurse that came with a doctor came to me later and introduced herself as a pastor's wife. She told me that she could see a Bible at my bedside. She asked me if she could pray with me. I said 'yes.' Now, her prayer gave me a new strength, vision and hope. The nurse also told me that I would conceive a baby very soon, and that we should have a baby by the following year. She also told me that she would be the very first person to carry my baby.

I conceived a baby within few months. My due date was December 8; my doctor told me that they were going to do a caesarean on November 25. When I saw the nurse, I told her about my operation; she jumped and said that she was the nurse on duty at the operation theatre on that same day. When I opened my eyes after the operation, she was carrying my baby in her hands. God showed his mercy tremendously in my life and fulfilled his promises as prophesied through the nurse. (...) I have three children now.

As in the cases of other conservative Christian communities,²⁸ the Bible is considered in the Tamil Pentecostal churches as the infallible word of God, literally dictated by God to

²⁸ See "Back to the Bible! The Pentecostal Understanding of Scripture" in Hollenweger, Walter J., *The Pentecostals*. London: SCM Press Ltd., 1972, pp. 291-307

its authors.²⁹ A common occurrence in my interviews was the expression “God speaks to me through the Bible,” and sometimes “God speaks to me directly through the Bible.” The Bible, then, is considered as a permanent visible and audible sign of God’s presence both in the life of the community and of the individual. Consequently, it is a permanent ‘miracle’ and can be also a source of ‘miracles.’ But mainly the Bible provides divine guidance (*vali naṭattal*) in every important event along the life’s path. The word *vali* means ‘path’ and the term *naṭattal* stands for ‘guide.’ Tamils understand very well what the Jews sing in praise of their Torah: “Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light on my path” (Ps. 119.105). To my interviewees, *vali naṭattal* in Hinduism was only an occasional occurrence; by contrast, the *vali naṭattal* that they have in Christianity through the Bible is constant. Bible reading and prayer often go together, and sometimes they are equivalent. Thus Jothi:

Whenever I come across a problem, I just sit and read the Bible. I ask God to speak to me, and God always speaks to me through the Bible. This doesn’t mean that I do not use my brains. For example, if I get a big bill; I know that I can’t pay immediately; so I ask God to help me and show me a way to pay! And when I pray I get peace of mind; the problem doesn’t worry me any more. Somehow I’ve sorted out the problem. That’s how I feel that God is with me. He has given me promises, and I’m sure that he will solve all the problems in my life.

There are times, however, when “using your own brains” does not help much; in times of helplessness, interviewees often have recourse to Bible reading, and at times the Bible is not only a miracle in itself, but also a source of *aṟputam*. The following testimony is part of the lore growing up among Pentecostal Tamils in London:

Me: Have you ever experienced that?

Vimalan: Yes, I have experienced this several times. I cannot give you a specific example, but I can tell you an incident that happened to my friend at the airport. My friend’s refugee application had been rejected, and a deportation order was served. The immigration authorities took him to the airport to be sent back to Sri Lanka. My friend was a new Christian and was praying continually. While waiting at the airport lounge, he began reading the Bible. The immigration officer who had brought my friend to the airport went inside and reported about his deportation. Then the chief immigration officer came to see my friend. He saw him reading a book and asked him what he was reading. My friend said that he was reading the Bible. Immediately the immigration

²⁹ For a pro Pentecostal view of the Bible, see Gilpin, G. W., “The Inspiration of the Bible” in Brewster, P. S. (ed.), *Pentecostal Doctrine*. Wales: P. S. Brewster, 1976, pp. 127-36.

officer called my friend to his office and gave him a six months visa, telling him that he did not need to go back to Sri Lanka.

In one case, God's providential guidance (*vaḷi naṭattal*) was perceived through dreams and visions, with a rather skilful interpretation of them by means of associations of ideas and images. Though an isolated case, Sinathurai's testimony about how his entire life is now pervaded with the miraculous deserves mention. In his conversation the most common generative words are 'miracles,' 'dreams,' 'visions,' 'blessings,' 'guidance' and 'happy'; also 'prayers,' 'fulfilment' and 'faith.' Back in Sri Lanka, when Sinathurai was still a Hindu, he was considering going to the Middle East to work for some years to save enough money in order to build a house for his family.

When I decided to go to a Middle Eastern country, first I went and gave *kāṇikkai* (offering) to *Mātā* temple and prayed. There is a man who looks after the temple, and I saw his wife in a dream, telling me that my wishes would be fulfilled. I saw the same dream again after a few days. (...) My wish was fulfilled and I went to Damam in Saudi Arabia. My faith in *Mātā* grew due to this. I worked in Saudi Arabia from 1984 to 1990.

In due time Sinathurai became the proud owner of a new house. But in two days of bombings and air raids, his house was utterly destroyed and his belongings looted. Sinathurai does not consider this as a divine judgement or displeasure. It seems that in his spiritual life there is room only for the consideration of God's blessings as rewards for meritorious works, not punishments for misdeeds; in Sinathurai's words there is no mention of God's displeasure and punishments. Sinathurai sees God's providential guidance more intensely after becoming a Christian. Shall I leave my present job? And if so, which of the two job openings shall I attempt? I need guidance to make that important decision. Shall I take baptism? That's a most important decision, and I need guidance to take the plunge.

Sinathurai: I was finding it very difficult to continue my job at Sira. It was exhausting and made me sick. An acquaintance told me that there was a job opening at a hardware shop, but they expected a person with ability to communicate in English. I can't speak English, so I did not take it seriously. I tried several other places; then I found a job in a farm, near the airport. The first day, before leaving work, I prayed and saw two knives in a vision. You see? Two knives – hardware shop. I decided to go and speak to the hardware shop manager. I cannot speak English, but I just wanted to try it. I got the new job immediately. The new job is a good one: 1) Only 10 hours a day, from 8.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m.; 2) it is close to my house; 3) heating system; 4) 1 ½ days off; 5) good salary... See how God loves me! In my previous job I couldn't come to church. But now Sunday is a day off and I can go to church

regularly. (...) God has granted me everything that I asked for! (...) I had some visions like these. Often I see a cross of white colour; sometimes it is green and red. I also see other visions and scenes to guide me. Shall I take baptism or not? Then I had a vision of a *cempu* (pot); the *cempu* is used to keep water, right? That cleared my struggle about baptism, and I decided to take it. (...)

Me: Do you mean that all those things in your life, job changing and so on, happened because you had become a Christian?

Sinathurai: Yes, I am happy now. My prayers are fulfilled. My life has become much easier. Before that, my life was a big struggle. I didn't see any happiness in my life. I think we should pray regularly, and then God will be with us wherever we go. I am a happy person now. I don't need anyone to guide me here. Now I get guidance from God and I am happy that I have this strength. (...)

Sinathurai still continues visiting *Mātā's* church in London and secretly keeps the pictures of his gods and indeed his radiant face, the expression of his hands and the delight in his narrative of dealings with the miraculous indicate that he is really very pleased with himself. He ends our conversation with a comparative statement of Hinduism and Christianity regarding *vaḷi naṭattal*:

In Hinduism I did not get any guidance about human life. Hinduism is not an organised religion. Whenever we felt like going to the temple, we went and offered *pūcai*; but we did not know how to correct our ways and lead a good life. But in Christianity we get a lot of *vaḷi naṭattal* (guidance) about how we should live in this world. We know what sin is. That is very important for everyone to know, don't you think so? (...)

From the above testimonies it is safe to conclude, with certain qualifications, that it is not miracles that produce faith, but it is faith that produces miracles. In none of these testimonies do we find that *aṟputam* is a violation or temporary suspension of the laws of nature. In fact, the expressions 'natural law' and 'law of nature' have very little resonance in the minds of refugee Tamils in London. But after their conversion to Pentecostal Christianity in London, they give full assent to the numerous miracles recorded in the Bible, with a literal interpretation of the events: they happened exactly as they are recorded. However, from their conversations we perceive that what is important about miracles is not that they happened in the past, or that they are happening to others, but that they are happening to them in their own lives.

Miracles, like beauty, are in the eyes of the beholder. Jesus performed many 'signs' and 'wonders'; they elicited different responses from his audience; for some they were just 'amazing' acts, and they were filled with amazement and said, "What sort of man is this,

that even winds and sea obey him?"³⁰ The same signs were, for others, stumbling blocks to faith³¹; and many others perceived that they were signs of God's saving activity "and believed in him"³². It is worth noticing, at this point, a seeming discrepancy between the theological emphasis of the Synoptic Gospels on the one hand and the Gospel of John on the other, regarding the relationship between 'faith' and 'signs,' between 'seeing' and 'believing.' In the Synoptic gospels we see quite often that faith precedes, and is required for, the performance of miracles (especially healing); so faith is a pre-condition for the execution of signs from God, and on one occasion it is recorded that "he could do no mighty work there... because of their unbelief"³³. By contrast, in John's Gospel there are some mentions of the reverse order of events: first people saw what Jesus had done and then they believed. There is no contradiction between the two approaches, because the most emphatic statement in John comes exactly at the very end of the original redaction of the book, when Jesus tells the unbelieving Thomas in the presence of the others:

Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.³⁴

What is the connection of this with the case of conversion? Where do our Tamil converts fall in all this? Do they need to see signs and wonders in order to believe, or on the contrary, because and after they believe they can see signs and wonders? We have already noted that in some cases (Mary and Swarnan) they saw miracles performed in Roman Catholic churches, but these *arputam* did not lead them to "change my religion"; at most, these signs reinforced their incipient faith (as they state retrospectively after their conversion). It is their present Christian faith that leads them to look at their own reality with new eyes; through faith they experience a kind of "mysteries"³⁵, and now they can see that their "wishes may be granted instantly";³⁶ this they interpret as the propitious presence of God in all its splendour. Chana Ullman suggests that a miracle is a "religious interpretation of the experience," and this coincides with our own interpretation. For Tamil converts in London, the performance of miracles in their lives

³⁰ Matthew.8: 27 (RSV).

³¹ John 11: 45-48 (RSV).

³² John 2:11; 11:45; 20:8, 29 (RSV).

³³ Mark 6: 5-6 (RSV).

³⁴ John 20.29 (RSV).

³⁵ Ullman, Chana, *The Transformed Self: The Psychology of Religious Conversion*. NY & London: Plenum Press, 1989, p. 53.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.153.

is a sign that God is being propitious to them, and this may be of the utmost importance for the reintegration of their shattered lives; ‘miracles’ should be understood in that context; otherwise miracles “may seem arbitrary” on the part of God’s activity and dealings with his people. For Ullman, the religious convert’s mind may “be seized by a sudden ‘insight’,”³⁷ with God’s presence or the presence of His messengers, “which consists in a different view of the problem which enables a resolution;”³⁸ so the experience can be called “miraculous.”³⁹ Swarnan did not expect a miracle for obtaining British citizenship, or Mary for repossession of the house taken over by the Bank. A six months visa for Swarnan, birth of children for Mary or even a holiday visit to India to Jothi are interpreted sufficiently as “miraculous events”. We may speak of a “blanket of love,”⁴⁰ when suddenly our perception of reality is totally transformed and we see everything under new glowing light, the light of the providential love of God; in fact, when bathed in the light of faith, the whole natural and historical reality is in itself a miraculous reality. Tamil converts in London experience the miraculous in the midst of the ordinary occurrences of life; this is one effect and manifestation of conversion, by living more intensely in the awareness of God’s presence in everything, when suddenly we see everything bathed in God’s love.

4.4 “I WENT TO CHURCH IN ORDER TO GET SOME FELLOWSHIP” (SATHA)

In my field research I was surprised to find that, in their narratives of ‘religious conversion,’ the word ‘church’ (in the sense of ‘community’, not of a building) appears very often, and the word ‘God’ appears very rarely in comparison, and usually only at the end of the story, not at the beginning. Soon I discovered an almost invariable pattern and a process that seem common to all of them, namely: Conversion is first to a community, and from the participation in the community life comes conversion to God. In his usually methodical and well-considered words, often enumerating his points, Satha states:

Tamils feel that, by coming to the United Kingdom, they have lost their territory, their homeland in Sri Lanka. So the only way to create a homeland here is to live together, establish a Sri Lankan lifestyle,

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 158

build temples, speak Tamil and preserve their Tamil *kalāccāram* in London.

But that is not completely possible in London; there is no meeting point for Sri Lankans to create this atmosphere; in Sri Lanka friends and relatives meet in the market places, shops, temples and family functions. But it is not possible here.

Tamils here have purchased few churches and turned them into Hindu temples, but converted temples do not provide the same atmosphere as the original Hindu temples in Sri Lanka or India. They do not produce that sense of devotion and holiness.

In other words, Satha stated that in the cases under study conversion to God is through belonging and participating in the life of a worshipping community; God and the worshipping community are in continuity, no doubt, but the process most commonly mentioned is in the following steps reported by Satha, Swarnan, Ganesh, and others:

1. State of loneliness, lostness, meaninglessness.
2. Introduction to the community, usually through a friend or relative.
3. Participation in the worship services and in the socialisation.
4. Full incorporation through baptism and changing of the name (they are given biblical names for their Tamil names, which are usually connected with Hindu gods).
5. Learning more about the new community through ongoing Bible classes and Christian education programmes.
6. Sharing the experience with outsiders (friends and relatives), inviting them to come to the community and to join it as well (the work of evangelisation).

Satha expresses very clearly the need to escape from loneliness, the need to belong and the need to join an existing community or to create a new one, if possible by replicating the community atmosphere of Sri Lankan villages: the ghetto is like an inadequate replica of the village; the temples (whether converted churches or newly built temples) are a replica of the village temples; the temple is the spiritual and social centre of gravitation, but here in London they cannot adequately serve the same functions, “not the same atmosphere”. The families are disjointed and spread out in different countries, they cannot be physically and spiritually reintegrated to their original state; the church (in the sense of ‘community’) is called to play the role and serve the functions of the family, though differently and inadequately. What is to be done? Satha continues, enumerating the roles and functions of the Tamil Pentecostal churches in London. According to Satha, the church serves as (abbreviated):

- a) A meeting place for Sri Lankans: "I felt lonely in London. I first went to church in order to get some fellowship."
- b) The Church handled Home Office problems. [Social services and assistance].
- c) The church was able to maintain a link between the refugees and their relatives' back home in Sri Lanka.
- d) The church provides worship services in the Tamil language: "I love my Tamil language. I could have just gone to an English church and become a Christian, but that is not my point. Like me, many Hindus went to Tamil churches purely because they loved our language." [Preserving cultural identity].
- e) Even if there are problems, Tamil Christians are able to face them together and fight together. [Solidarity group].
- f) In an emergency, they have a place to go [Crisis intervention].

So in the case of Satha the Christian community filled a social and spiritual gap in his life; we must remember that the 'social' and the 'spiritual' in the Tamil mentality are not two separate layers of existence. They coincide in the wholeness of Tamil cultural life: the supernatural, the social and the natural. He could fill this gap in the Christian church better than in a Hindu temple. He did not care much about God (the 'myths' of the new religion); after all, you can meet many more gods in a Hindu temple than in a Christian church that worships only one. He did not care much about the peculiar ways of worshipping (the 'rituals' of the new religion). Hindu rituals are much more elaborate, much more attractive and more in accordance with the Tamil *kalāccāram*; but the living and dynamic fellowship (the 'code' of conduct of the new religion) led him to a deeper involvement and participation in the community life. Eventually Satha was baptised and later became a 'born again Christian'. This sequence is not peculiar to Satha; he only puts it more clearly and forcefully than others. In some cases (voiced especially by Jothi and Hanna), the rituals of the worshipping community exasperated them, and they had to assimilate them slowly. Jothi:

The first time I went to church it was because a relative of mine invited me. I did not like the worship in any way. The way they worshipped, the shouting and clapping, all those "Praise the Lord!" and "Hallelujahs"! just made me crazy. But once a month we went to church for a get-together and to meet many Sri Lankans. After a few months I began to enjoy the songs and to feel at home in the church atmosphere. I had never read the Bible before, but then I started reading it and found myself strengthened and encouraged by the verses. I felt a kind of inner peace in me. On one side, parties went on as usual; but on the other side, I was experiencing a new spiritual awakening in my life.

The reader must have noticed that there is practically no mention of God's initiative or activity in the processes of conversion of Jothi and Satha. It seems that faith in God did not play a fundamental role in Jothi's life for many months of attending the Christian church, until she decided to be baptised. Baptism for Jothi was a kind of "personal rebirth"⁴¹ that made a turn in her attitude to life. For a year and a half she attended the religious and social services of the church, believing in herself as she puts it and counting on her own resources to solve all her 'problems':

At one moment in my life I felt that I should receive baptism, or I would rather say that I was 'compelled' (*kaṭṭāyam*) to take baptism, because by deciding to take it I believed that a change would take place in my life. Until I took baptism, I believed (*nampikkai*) in myself for everything; but I came to a point when I felt that I needed to believe (*nampikkai*) in God. I had been attending this church for the last one and a half years; but whenever I came across a problem, I tried to solve it by myself, or contacted counsellors and others for guidance (*utavi*). People never solved any of my problems; they could listen or give advice, but they could not struggle with me in life to solve anything. Then I believed that God could do it.

It seems that in the case of Jothi baptism was not the consequence of her conversion, but that her conversion came as a result of the peak experience of baptism, an inversion of the terms as we find them in most narratives of conversion. This is the key passage in Jothi's long narrative of the incidents that led her to take baptism:

The day before baptism I thought back on my life and confessed all my sins to God and asked for his forgiveness. I asked my husband if he also would like to receive baptism, but he said 'no.' I sat in front of him and asked him forgiveness for all the errors I had done in my life with him. I argued for several things, but that day I asked forgiveness for hurting him in several ways. The baptismal service was held on 2nd August in the church. After baptism I felt light hearted and cheerful. It was like sharing your burdens with someone you trust, you share everything and cry; then you feel relaxed. (...) I stood in front of the whole congregation; while I was sharing my story and testimony I started

⁴¹ Eric Gritsch said: "In born-again literature as well as in born-again meetings, the conversion experience is seldom linked with water baptism, even though baptism is mentioned, usually in connection with 'baptism by the Holy Spirit.' Those who feel born-again think of sacraments as matters of church polity rather than as essential elements of gospel communication." Gritsch, Eric W., *Born Againism: Perspectives on a Movement*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982, p. 92. On the contrary we saw that the personal rebirth experiences are important for Suriya, Jothi, Mary and Chandran; though not so prominent in others. For the concept of baptism among Pentecostal churches, see Bloch-Hoell, Nils, *The Pentecostal Movement*. Norway: Scandinavian University Books, 1964, pp. 164-67.

crying. I cannot remember what I said, except that I was asking my husband's forgiveness the previous day. While I was sharing my testimony - I was told later - the congregation also cried. I came back to my seat and my husband hugged me and kissed me and said that he also wanted to receive baptism on that day. He got up and said that he would like to receive baptism and went for it.

In Ganesh's story we do not find any mention of 'God', only a vigorous and passionate mention of Jesus Christ in his life after his conversion; but most important is his enthusiastic appraisal of the role of the Christian community in reintegrating his shattered family life. Ganesh needed and wanted somebody to talk:

I became a Christian in 1990. My life was at a crossroads in Britain. I felt that if I stayed in Britain, one day I would just grow old and die. I am not a strong man (...) I wanted to talk to someone and went to the Citizens Advisory Bureau; that was of no help; they advised me to go back to my country. (...) I was trying to find a solution then and there. I had an emotional need. Christianity served this purpose. (...) I became a Christian because of my emotional need. I went to a friend of mine who is a Christian. He listened to my story. He made me sit with him and offered me a cup of tea. Others had ignored me, thinking that I was going to ask for help from them; but this Christian friend said that, if I had no place to stay, I could come and stay with him. Also he said that if I needed money he could help me. I could not believe this. I asked why he was doing it. He said that he had not much money or gold to give me, but he could offer Jesus Christ as my personal saviour and friend. This was the message of salvation and deliverance for me. I found a family in the church. The church became my family and my identity. I was able to find my feet in Britain. That alone is enough to say that Jesus Christ is alive. The church has become my family, brother and sister, mother and father, relatives, belonging, love, care and concern for me. And very specially: you know that you count and that you are important, and that there is someone waiting for you and taking care of you. (...) This is the optimism and upliftment that we have in Christianity. (...) They [other converts] had become Christians because they had an emotional need and a spiritual need. They were looking for something that they had lost. They were lost, (...) utterly lost, (...) I was lost.

Others express an analogous process more briefly and less forcefully.

Suriya: One day in 1995 (...) I saw the Emmanuel Christian Centre name board. I was happy to see that they were conducting Christian services in Tamil. On my own I went to a Sunday worship service. (...) The Christian worship services made me interact with the living God.

The need to interact with others is stressed by Vimalan, mainly because of his inability to communicate in English. Vimalan is alone, but cannot be 'by himself':

I have several problems. Though I go to Church to meet Christian friends, I do not have any relatives in this country. I live alone and so have to do all things alone. I have a language problem. I need to go and talk to different offices and organisations about my problems, but I am unable to do so without the help of someone. (...) I see more friendly people with me in the church. For example, in 1995 a church member came to see me at my place, inquired about my problems, and arranged a job for me. Usually I do not ask for help, because I do not want to trouble other people, but this barrier is broken within the church. (...) Sri Lankan people in the United Kingdom live in loneliness. They have no entertainment. Starting a new life in another country is not an easy task. When people go through difficult times in their lives, if they are invited to a place where they think that they can get peace of mind, they just come to see what is happening. Once they realise the presence of the Holy Spirit, they accept Jesus as their personal saviour. (...)

The story of Mary is exemplary in all its drama; she came to London in 1985 to live with her loving aunt; but her aunt was living in her son's house, and one day she kindly invited Mary to step out and find her own living quarters. Mary was left alone, to stand by herself; she had always been so dependent on others. Her words are self-explanatory:

Urgently I needed some people around me, which I did not have in London. (...) I was not good at English and I came to know about a programme of English classes for Sri Lankans. I registered my name and in the class I met several Sri Lankans. One girl became very friendly with me. (...) She invited me to her home one day, and there I met another girl who was a Christian, a convert from Hinduism. I became very friendly with my friend's friend. (...) This new friend invited me to her room for a weekend and suggested that we go for a picnic. I went to her place the following weekend. There was heavy rain during that week, and we couldn't go for the picnic; instead she invited me to come to church. I went with her to a church called Kensington Temple. (...) [English speaking]

With these words Mary sets what we could call the “pre-liminal stage” or “growing awareness...through the experience of deficit, feelings of dissatisfaction”⁴² of her conversion, in three steps: 1) loneliness and the need for community; 2) the quest for community; 3) stepping at the threshold of the community. Mary continues to explain her experience in the threshold of her conversion, the ‘separation’ or ‘liminal stage’ of her rites of passage to her incorporation into the new community. Mary continues:

I felt the presence of God in the services. I experienced some kind of peace and happiness throughout the services. (...)

As in so many cases, the decision to ‘take the whole plunge’ and receive baptism was a long process full of hesitations; submission to receive baptism meant an irreversible decision to ‘change my religion’; curiously enough, it does not entail a public repudiation of Hinduism, its gods, rituals and practices,⁴³ as one might expect. Mary continues to describe how she was ‘compelled’ to give a public testimony and receive baptism; the Tamil word that we translate as ‘compelled’ is (*kaṭṭāyam*), which is usually translated as ‘forced’; the same word is used by others as well. Mary:

After a few weeks, my friend started compelling me to receive baptism. I wasn’t sure about baptism. Of course I felt comfortable in the church services, but did not want to take baptism and change my religion. I knew that my parents would not approve a religious change in me. Yet, I did not know what to tell my friend. (...)

A Dutch lady, a leader of the church, approached me and asked if I accepted Jesus as my saviour. I said ‘yes.’ Then she said: “If so, you should obey God’s command and receive baptism.” (...) I couldn’t explain her my situation at home, the details of my family, and the way I thought about church services. The first thing was my language barrier; the second thing was that I felt that she couldn’t understand

⁴² Victor Turner maintained that the process of an individual from one belief system to the other usually goes through three phases. He explained these phases as, “separation, margin (or limen, the Latin for threshold, signifying the great importance of real or symbolic thresholds at this middle period of the rites through curricular, “being in a tunnel,” would better hit off the quality of this phase in many cases, its “hidden” nature, its sometimes mysterious darkness), and re-aggregation.” Turner, Victor, “Passages, Margins and Poverty: Religious Symbols of Communitas” in *Worship*. Vol. 46, #7, p. 393; Peter Toon argues that these three stages as “growing awareness”, “a period of consideration” and “incorporation into the society.” Toon, Peter, *About Turn – The Decisive Event of Conversion*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1987, p. 177.

⁴³ We shall see how some of my interviewees look back to their previous Hindu practices without condemning them, even accepting them on equal footing with Christianity: “I worship all the gods, thinking that they are all one,” says one of my interviewees; see below, subsection 4.6.

my cultural set-up. (...) I did not reply anything. (...) I agreed to receive baptism. I believed in Jesus, that was all, but religious traditions did not mean anything to me. I received baptism after three months, in September 1986. My name was changed from Namagal to Mary. I worshipped at this church until 1990. (...)

With the three steps of 1) public confession of Jesus as personal saviour, 2) baptism by total immersion, and 3) the changing of her name, Mary completed the second stage - the liminal stage - of her rites of passage from the ancestral Hinduism of her family back in Sri Lanka to her new religion in London. The third and final stage – re-aggregation or the post-liminal stage– entailed Mary’s full participation in the life of the community and an apostolic zeal to convert all the members of her family to the Christian religion. But Mary did not feel completely at ease in an English-speaking congregation, and one day she had to switch from English-speaking to a Tamil-speaking congregation. Mary concludes:

I came to know that there was a Tamil congregation at East Ham. (...) While continuing my attendance to the English church at Kensington Temple, I started attending Tamil services as well. After some time I told the pastor of the Tamil church that I wanted to marry a born again man. The pastor brought a proposal and I married my present husband in 1990. (...) My parents did not create any problems about my religious change. They said that if I was happy, they had no problem.

Most of the writers on conversion that I know present an inverted order: first conversion to God, second incorporation into a Christian community of their choice.⁴⁴ Often they measure their experiences with the pattern received from history; but we are now convinced, and our research proves sufficiently, that the exceptional cannot be taken as the measuring rod for the normal. In most of the cases of conversion to Christianity from Hinduism, the ‘normal’ process appears to be first, attraction to the Christian community; second, incorporation into that community by way of baptism with all its precedents (‘pre-liminal’ stage), its concomitants (‘liminal’ stage), and its consequence (‘post-liminal’ stage). I find a similar sequence in the writings of others who have used

⁴⁴ See Jacobs, Donald R., “Culture and the Phenomena of Conversion: Reflections in East African Setting” in *Gospel in Context*. Vol. 1, #3, July 1978, p. 4; Smith, John E (ed.), *Jonathan Edwards: Religious Affections*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959, Part II, Ch VII, pp. 340-341; Barth, Karl. “The Awakening to Conversion” in Conn, Walter E (ed.), *Conversion: Perspectives on Personal and Social Transformation*. NY: Alba House, 1978, p. 37; Underwood, Alfred Clair, *Conversion: Christian and Non-Christian: A Comparative Psychological Study*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1925, p. 134;

an empirical method in this field of study; for example, in a comparative study of conversion conducted among Tamils in India and Great Britain, Andrew Wingate observes that for converted Indian Tamils in Great Britain, their conversion to Christianity “is not normally a rejection of their previous faith, but a positive attraction to Christianity.”⁴⁵

The prophets of Israel call the people to ‘turn’ away from disloyalty to fidelity to the covenant relationship with their God and with each other; *teshuvah* is a reincorporation of the people into the covenantal relationship in fidelity to the Torah. Conversion to the community comes first in Jesus’ preaching; he calls people to ‘conversion’ (*metanoia*) because the Kingdom of God is at the door, and a total change of attitude is required to enter the Kingdom, which is a fulfilment of the old covenantal relationship extended to all, Jews and gentiles alike; his preaching is an invitation to enter the Kingdom, to form and/or join a community. In the Apostolic Church we see that “there were added that day about three thousand souls. (...) And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”⁴⁶ Success of conversions was measured (at least by Luke the author of Acts) by the increase of the nascent community. In the American Church in 1946, according to Michael Argyle, 71% of African Americans were church members compared with 55% of whites because for the Blacks the Church means more and it acts as a kind of community centre.⁴⁷ Conversion in India, as Julian Saldanha observes, was successful among many groups because people were “searching for a sense of identity, of belonging and for self-determination”⁴⁸ in the Christian church. In the early church Tertullian wrote that many pagans were converted by seeing the love and concern of Christians for each other: “Look how they love each other!”⁴⁹ Similarly, many Tamils in London are attracted to Pentecostal Christianity because they see “how these Christians care for each other.”

It is refreshing to read among missiologists and theologians of inculturation a new theological approach to the subject of religious conversion that better reflects the

⁴⁵Wingate, Andrew D. C., *A Study of Recent Conversion to and From Christianity in the Tamil Area of South India. op. cit.*, p. 393.

⁴⁶ Acts 2:41, 47 (RSV).

⁴⁷ Argyle, Michael, *Religious Behaviour*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958, p. 134.

⁴⁸ Saldanha, Julian, “Patterns of Conversion in Indian Mission History” in *Mission and Conversion A Reappraisal. op.cit.*, p.85.

⁴⁹ See Tertullian, [T. Herbert Bindley (tr.)] *The Apology of Tertullian for the Christians*. London: Parker, 1890.

experience of those of us who come from a so-called 'non-Christian world'; the British missiologist Aylward Shorter writes in this respect, with his usual lucidity and logical sequence:

Religion is by definition a cultural phenomenon, and the Gospel is basically a way of life that is lived in accordance with diverse cultures. Since culture is always the property of a community and serves to give the community identity, it follows that religious conversion has a community dimension. This is especially true in the case of Christian evangelisation, which derives its success and efficacy from interpersonal and community relationships, and which preaches a community ethic based on fraternal love. Christian conversion is therefore never a purely individual and intellectual journey. On the one hand, *the community invites the individual to join with it in common witness and worship; and on the other hand, the individual takes the step of joining the community which issues the invitation. The one who responds to the invitation enters into the common field of experience that belongs to this community, adopts its common understandings and judgements, and accepts its common commitments.* [italics mine] Even when there is a one-to-one evangelisation, the evangeliser acts on behalf of the community and invites the one addressed to join it.⁵⁰

This is a theologian speaking. It is refreshing to find that some sociologists of religion have arrived at the same conclusion and therefore a mutually enriching dialogue between the two disciplines is not only desirable, but also possible. Let us hear a sociologist of religion in consonance with a theologian; Herve Carrier writes:

Let us note here that the convert's identification with the church includes the totality of behaviour in its cognitive and motivational aspects. Both preparatory and subsequent phases of the convert's decision will involve an initiation into the church's doctrine. His will to belong to the church constitutes not only a desire for social affiliation, but also an affective and intellectual participation in all that the church symbolises and teaches.⁵¹

In the London Tamil experience we could say that first comes 'conversion of the heart,' and then 'conversion of the mind'; first affective conversion (consent of the heart), and then intellectual conversion (assent of the mind); or in the emphatic statement of

⁵⁰ Shorter, Aylward, *Evangelization and Culture*. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994, p. 57.

⁵¹ Carrier, Herve, *The Sociology of Religious Belonging. op.cit.*, p. 115.

liberation theologians, “conversion to the neighbour” (*orthopraxis*) comes first, “conversion to the Lord” (*orthodoxia*) follows.⁵²

Whether a conversion is total or partial, profound or shallow, lasting or temporary, emotional or reflective, sudden or gradual, irreversible or reversible, committed or uncommitted, and selfless or selfish, we just do not have the measuring instruments to evaluate its genuineness and sterling authenticity. We may say of the Tamil converts in London that:

The community of faith is seen as a network of persons related through their common values and beliefs in God... These values and beliefs do not need to be made explicit or clear; they sense that such an effort might lead to disagreements and breaches of relationships. The important thing is to provide mutual support in times of trouble or difficulty and to maintain a support web of interpersonal connectedness through the community of faith.⁵³

We know the experiences of the Tamil converts as they externalise them in their conversations; for us a person is a Christian when he/she says so; a person has been converted if he/she says so. It could also be said that Tamil refugees give priority to the heart over the mind. This is reflected in the disproportion between the enthusiasm they show about their new community (a ‘charismatic community’ as we shall see in our next chapter) and the paucity of the intellectual content of their Christian belief, as we shall see in the next section.

4.5 “I BELIEVED IN JESUS: THAT WAS ALL” (MARY)

In the first stages of my research I obtained and read the official documents and formularies of the constitution, doctrinal tenets and history of the Pentecostal communities I had proposed to study. These churches form a kind of loose federation of individual communities, each one enjoying a large margin of freedom to organise its life in the best way to suit its needs. I found that their doctrinal tenets were common to all the Pentecostal churches that I know, with strong emphasis on the Bible as the sole authority in matters of faith and conduct, with a literal interpretation of its text in order to uphold

⁵² See Gutierrez, Gustavo, “A Spirituality of Liberation” in *Conversion: Perspectives on Personal and Social Transformation. op.cit.*, pp. 307-13.

⁵³ Fowler James W., “Religious Congregations: Varieties of Presence in Stages of Faith” in Astley, Jeff and Francis, Leslie J (eds.). *Christian Perspectives on Faith Development: A Reader*. Herefordshire: Gracewing Fowler Wright Books and William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, Michigan, 1992, p. 376.

its supreme authority and inerrancy, adult baptism of total immersion obligatory to all, and 'baptism of the Spirit' with the speaking of tongues as a sign of 'being born again.' They have no creeds to memorise, though they memorise many Bible verses; it could be said that their official orthodoxy corresponds to the fundamental doctrinal tenets of other Pentecostal communities, and is not distant from the system of beliefs confessed by other denominations that practise adult baptism by total immersion.

In the initial, tentative and informal interviews with different members I expected a good measure of conformity of the members to the 'official' teachings of their respective churches; I soon discovered a wide discrepancy regarding their attitude to their former Hinduism and Hindu gods, to the value attached to the Christian rituals of baptism and speaking in tongues, and to the new spiritual hierarchy that is becoming fixed among them, in this ascending process:

1. The seekers. (Allowed to participate in all functions except Holy Communion).
2. The converts. (They have confessed Jesus as their saviour in a religious service).
3. The baptised. (Full members of the community).
4. The leaders. (Endowed with all spiritual gifts).

This is not an 'official' spiritual hierarchy, but I saw frequent indications that it is being developed in the community; some of my interviewees expressed some resentment at being called 'converts' (Chandran, Jothi) and others indicated some measure of scorn towards 'born-againism' (Mary, Ganesh) in their words and silences, in the tone of their voice, the squint of their eyes and the gestures of their hands. The caste system has been totally abolished and is not even mentioned in the community; all members are equal under God and in the bosom of the community; however, though castes are not openly mentioned, they are sometimes insinuated. The abolition of castes adds to the attractiveness of the communities. Nobody has authority over the others by reason of birth, only Jesus has authority over all by reason of being the saviour of all.

I never asked "what are your doctrinal tenets?" or "what is the creed that gives meaning to your life?" or any other question that might invite them to put on a spiritual mask of piety. Only after hours of conversation in an easy-going atmosphere, an observable pattern began to emerge (Swarnan, Sinathurai, Ganesh, Vimalan, Mary, Sathivel): the creed of the community. It is of the utmost simplicity. I may put in these propositions:

1. Jesus is God.
2. God is Jesus.
3. The Bible contains and is God's word to us.

4. God speaks to me through the Bible.
5. God is performing miracles in my life.

In our conversations I never heard a single mention of God being the Father of Jesus and so the Father of all, or of Jesus being the Son of God, or of the Holy Spirit being also God on equal footing with the Father and the Son; no mention of the Christian Trinity or its difference from the Hindu Trimurti of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva as the three main gods of the Hindu pantheon. Of course out of silence nothing can be proved; but their silence about those seemingly fundamental tenets of Christianity at least implies that they are not of primary importance in their mind and devotion to deserve frequent mention.

The name of Jesus appears quite often in their conversations. From them it becomes evident that, in their minds and their lives, “Jesus is alive” (Ganesh), he bestows all kinds of blessings to his worshippers (Mary), and is “the living God” (Sathivel); the Tamil expression *uyirulla kaṭavul* can be equally translated as ‘**the** living God’ or as ‘**a** living god’ alongside other gods; Jesus is certainly endowed with a divine nature and attributes; prayers are addressed to Jesus directly in public, and also ‘miracles’ are often attributed to Jesus privately (especially so in the case of Mary). Is Jesus the only God, and are all other gods just idols, or ‘demons’? The official orthodoxy as heard every Sunday from the pulpit states that there is only one God and that Jesus is God as articles of faith, with frequent mentions of texts taken from the Second Isaiah; but only one of my interviewees (Suriya) echoes the official orthodoxy of the community in considering the gods of the Hindu pantheon as “man made idols”; Suriya was the youngest of my interviewees (19 years) and at one point states that he is listening to God’s voice calling him to the Christian ministry.

Suriya: (...) I was able to understand that I was worshipping idols all those days. (...) In Isaiah we read that “they have eyes but they can’t see, they have ears but they can’t hear.” (...) I felt that my eyes were opened through Christianity. I was able to experience a new life, a life with new meaning and goal. (...) I was able to experience some power coming into me and made me to understand life in a meaningful way. (...) I felt that I was delivered from some kind of pressure.

Me: What kind of pressure?

Suriya: Christian life makes sense. I can understand the beginning and the end. I know what will happen after my death. (...) One God. (...)

Me: What about Hinduism?

Suriya: I had now realised the truth. (...) When I was a Hindu, I did not search for the truth. I believed that Hinduism was the only truth, but now I believe that only in Christianity I can find the truth. (...)

Me: Did you ever hear about Christianity before?

Suriya: I have heard the name 'Jesus,' but did not know anything about Christianity. (...) After realising the truth I now feel that I must share the truth with my friends. (...)

Me: Should every Christian tell about Jesus to others?

Suriya: Exactly. That's the way it should work. (...) Now we have a very good opportunity to share the Good News to Sri Lankans living in London.

Me: No social pressure here.

Suriya: Yes, you are right. If you analyse the social pressure, there is a spiritual dimension to it. The Bible says that even the atmosphere is controlled by demonic elements. (...) As a Christian I have a great responsibility towards other Hindus who do not know about Christ. Not everyone can talk about Christ with Hindus. (...) Like me, one should go through the born-again experience to share the Good News. Saint Paul says that we are the written epistles... As a Christian I only value my relationship with God. (...) I am waiting for God's call to join the full-time ministry.

Suriya's interview (it looks like a 'testimony') reminds me of conversations with other Pentecostal Christians I have met in Sri Lanka and elsewhere. He is in no way typical of all the Tamil Pentecostal Christians I met in London. Curiously enough, he is the only one to mention the word 'truth' (*uṇmai*) and to express his open repudiation of Hinduism as "life in darkness" or as life in the grips of 'traditions,' and its gods as deaf-mute manmade gods. Suriya's case fits the description of conversion written by Richard Travisano:

The person goes through a period of intense "inner struggle". There is great trauma. The actor reflects at great length on his change. The actor and all his others see his change as monumental and he is identified by himself and others as a new different person. The actor has a new universe of discourse which negates the values and meanings of his old ones by exposing the "fallacies" of their assumptions and reasoning. The actor has great involvement with his new identity and perspective.⁵⁴

This description is applicable only to Suriya among my interviewees; also only Suriya shows an exclusivistic attitude towards other religions and their gods, though he mentions only Hinduism. All the others in my sample seem to have a more benevolent view of Hinduism, and a good number of them still consider Hinduism as a valid means of satisfying their spiritual thirst, as we shall see later. So the common duality of

⁵⁴ Travisano, Richard V. "Alternation and Conversion as Qualitatively Different Transformations" in Stone, Gregory P & Faberman, Harvey A (eds.), *Social Psychology through Symbolic Interaction*. Mass.: Xerox College Publishing, 1970, p. 602.

‘conversion’ – ‘aversion’ so characteristic of newly converts is applicable only to Suriya and – perhaps – also to Mary; the rest do not show any repudiation of Hinduism and their gods, in spite of frequent exhortations from the pulpits.

Prayers are addressed indeterminately to God or to Jesus. In Tamil folk Hinduism the word ‘god’ is usually followed by his/her temple (*kōvil*); when a person is especially devoted to one particular deity, then the god in question is usually mentioned as “*piḷḷaiyār kōvil*”, “*murukan kōvil*” and so forth; after changing their religion, the name ‘God’ is explicitly or implicitly accompanied by his proper name, ‘Jesus’ and *kōvil* was replaced by the place where the church is situated, Southall church, Palmers Green church, Tooting church and so forth. Images and pictures of the gods are frowned upon, but the converts often have pictures of Jesus in their bibles and also at home. When they speak of Jesus they think of him as God; when they speak of God, most probably they think of him as Jesus. When we look at the emerging apostolic church, we realise that the earliest Christian confession was simply “Jesus is Lord”⁵⁵ and also “Jesus is the Christ and Lord.”⁵⁶ The baptismal confession of faith among Tamil Pentecostals in London is simply “Jesus is my Saviour,”⁵⁷ as the earliest sufficient baptismal confession was “Jesus is Lord.” So there is an evident similarity between the nascent apostolic church in Jerusalem and the nascent Pentecostal Tamil churches in London in this respect as well as in some others that we shall mention later.

The Bible is considered as “the word from God,” and is divinely inspired by dictation to the human authors who are only amanuenses for God; consequently it is infallible and firmly considered as the supreme and only authority in matters of faith and conduct. The converts read it assiduously individually and in groups; but usually they do not read entire books, but only convenient passages and verses (Sathivel, Jothi); in reading and highlighting those passages and verses they find guidance in their perplexities (Jothi), consolation in their sufferings and confirmation of their beliefs; they carry their black leather covered Bibles devoutly and conspicuously, one would say as a visible sign of their Bible-oriented Christianity. In this they do not seem different from other Bible-oriented conservative Christians.

⁵⁵ See for example 1 Corinthians 12: 3 (RSV).

⁵⁶ Peter’s discourse on the Day of Pentecost concludes with the earliest confession of faith in the Jerusalem church: “God has made him both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2: 36. RSV).

⁵⁷ A few times in my interviews I heard the expression “Jesus is my saviour and friend.”

After joining the Christian community, the perplexity characteristic of the state of *anomie* is dissipated and now they see the environing reality with new eyes,⁵⁸ and their lives are experienced under the providential guidance of God; they often state that now they see a purpose to their lives, and this purpose is no other than God's plan for them; even the sufferings they have undergone are considered as worth the trouble, and even in some cases they express their thanks to God for them; they seem to imply that "if I had not gone through so much trouble in the past, I should not be able to feel so much joy in the present."

4.6 "FOR ME ALL RELIGIONS ARE EQUAL"-BALA

If we take this text out of its context, it may mean everything or nothing. It may mean that all religions are equally right, or that all religions are equally wrong; that all religions are instruments of salvation (*iraiçippu* denotes "deliverance" or "liberation"), or that all religions are instruments of oppression (Chandran). Let us look at the context in Krishna's life and words. In his village Krishna used to go to Hindu temples regularly and to the Christian church (Methodist) occasionally. In London, for three years he went to Christian churches (All-Tamil Pentecostal) regularly and to Hindu temples occasionally. He is a strong man, full of vitality and willingness to lend a helping hand. He was a young teacher in his village, a good sportsman and organiser of sports events. He seems more concerned for what religions do than for what they say, or in fashionable Christian theological parlance, more interested in orthopraxis ("right action") than in orthodoxy ("right doctrine"). Here are his words:

Krishna: There were some very poor families in my village. The Christian church helped them to build their houses. Their life was improved, but some Hindus criticised this. Though I am a Hindu myself, I supported the work of the church. I told others that we didn't do anything to help them, and therefore we had no right to criticise them. When there was work to do to build a Methodist Church in my village, I did *ciramatāṇam* (voluntary donation of communal labour) and helped. We never felt the difference between the two religions in our village. But now I feel the difference. I feel that all religions are the same, and I respect every religion

Me: You have said that you did not see any difference between Hindus and Christians in your village, but now you see the difference here. Please explain.

Krishna: Here I have seen people arguing about their religion. They say that only their religion is correct and proper. Some people have

⁵⁸ Carrier, Herve, *The Sociology of Religious Belonging. op.cit.*, p. 111.

even recorded a sermon by a preacher who said that Christianity is the only proper religion and sent it to a Hindu priest in London. For me all religions are equal. (...) When I came here I went to Christian churches. I have done that in Sri Lanka, too. Some of my friends invited me to go to “born again” churches. I went there without any problem.

For three years Krishna attended Pentecostal churches in London, but he never gave testimony of conversion or received baptism, consistent with his pluralistic religious stand. In his village some Hindus had criticised him for his broad-minded attitude; but in London he was put off by the narrow-minded approach of Christians:

Here I bought a house and invited a Hindu priest to come and bless the house; I had organised a get-together and invited my born-again Christian friends. But they refused to come, saying that they could not participate in any event where a Hindu priest was present. From that day on, I decided not to go to Christian churches. If I can go to their church, why can they not come to my temple? My friends knew that I was hurt and that now I do not go because of them, but I am very firm in my decision.

He had friends among All-Tamil Pentecostal churchgoers and participated in Christian house meetings organised by the Tamil churches, but stopped attending church services. Krishna’s attitude to religions was all-inclusive, and it clashed against the all-exclusive attitude of his born-again Christians. He is still hurt by this serious slight on the part of his Christian friends. Krishna learned the lesson that often times Christian orthodoxy is an obstacle to ‘practice’; being oriented towards ‘right action’ rather than towards ‘right doctrine,’ he rejected Christianity altogether. So we may conclude that, in Krishna’s mind, all religions are equally right if they do the right thing, and all religions may be equally wrong if they practise the wrong things, disregarding what they may teach or what teachings they may condemn.

Jothi, another interviewee whom we met above, accepts the validity of all religions, but her mind seems more utilitarian than Krishna’s outgoing attitude: each chooses the practice of a religion according to his own tastes, preferences and needs or, in the parlance of the techniques of marketing employed by Cimino, “user-friendly.”⁵⁹ Jothi also has a great vitality and is always willing to give a helping hand. Unlike Krishna, she had given testimony and received baptism in the emotion-loaded ceremony that we have

⁵⁹ Cimino, Richard & Lattin, Don, *Shopping for Faith: American Religion in the New Millennium*.i op.cit., p. 56.

just read above, a kind of religious peak experience. Most of her previous problems began to be solved, and in the Christian community she has found an escape valve for her exuberant vitality:

I am comfortable within the church. There I see people with the same goal of getting to know Jesus more and more. (...) I am not saying that the church is the only way to see or realise God. I have seen God through the church, but I will not criticise anyone who belongs to another religion. I do not think religion can take people to God. For example, I was working for an insurance company some time ago, and we had many policies to sell. Everyone would buy the policy that suited him best. At the end of the day, if we analyse all the policies, we see that all provide security to individuals in different ways. For me religion is like that; people try to see God through different religions; but at the end of the day we see that all are searching for security in their lives. I am happy with my policy (religion), but I cannot say that other policies (religions) are wrong, because all the policies provide security.

After some moments of reflection, Jothi concludes:

I would not say that my stand is a popular stand in my church. I do not think God lives in any religion: God lives in you. I sometimes have arguments about this with my pastor and others. But this is my firm belief.

Jothi could mention a “great cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12.1) in support of her religion of interiority: her expression “God lives in you” is frequent in the mystical tradition of Hinduism, Judaism and Christianity. Shorter insists that Christian conversion is based on “community relationships” where all are bound by “fraternal love.”⁶⁰ Since this has been the understanding of Jothi after her conversion experience, she became quite outspoken about her views concerning the validity of other religious traditions with the Church pastor. Jothi’s attitude seems genuine and not learned in books (though she takes her Bible everywhere she goes) or conversations with others. If her mystical attitude is so inclusive, it is no wonder now that she felt offended when I called her ‘a new convert’ in my first encounter with her. (Chapter 1: Introduction) She confesses that she is happy in the Christian church, and implies that anyone would be equally happy in the bosom of any other religion, provided that ‘God dwells in you.’ We cannot claim that there was a radical change of her religion, though there was indeed a radical change in her orientation to life after joining the Christian community. Strictly speaking, we cannot

⁶⁰ Shorter, Aylward, *Evangelisation and Culture. op.cit.*, p. 57.

say that there was a religious “paradigm shift” in her life, and her case of ‘conversion’ does not fit in the common definition of ‘change of religion.’ It seems more appropriate to call it *metanoia*, a radical transformation of her personality, not necessarily of her religious opinions.

Jothi would agree with Saint Paul that we are all temples of the divine (1 Cor. 6:19); if so, conversion to God would be equivalent to entering into those temples to encounter him, in other words, in turning into our own inner selves to find God there; like Saint Augustine, Jothi could say that we need not go out of ourselves, because Truth dwells in the innermost; in this variety of religious experience, the changing of religious opinions or creeds seems irrelevant; along this line, Tippet states that one mode of conversion is an “act of modification”⁶¹(not exclusion of one to be replaced by other) of existing beliefs; and also Saldanha, who states that converts to Christianity can retain their customs and usage in a modified form.⁶² Sinathurai would declare that God is in every temple and every religion, and there we can find him and worship him under different names and behind many faces. Jothi and Sinathurai represent two extremes of religious attitude: the universalism of interiority (Jothi) and the universalism of exteriority (Sinathurai); both would agree, in their theology of pluralism, that there is only one God under different modalities and manifestations. Both Jothi and Krishna would agree with Sinathurai’s mild protest against the official radical monotheism of Pentecostal orthodoxy:

I don’t see why one should be banned from places of worship.

Another aspect worth considering is the role of *piḷḷaiyār* in Hanna’s spiritual life and the seemingly parallel role of Saint Anthony (and later of Jesus) in the spiritual life of her sister Mary. In Sri Lankan folk Catholicism the Portuguese Saint Anthony is a benevolent saint, represented as a smiling young Franciscan, almost an adolescent, who listens to the prayers of his devotees, accepts their offerings, and grants the petitions or ‘performs miracles’; analogous attitudes and powers are attributed, in folk Hinduism, to the god *piḷḷaiyār*, the most affable god in the Hindu pantheon. Is Saint Anthony a case of inculturation of Christianity into Tamil culture, or is his cult a Hinduisation of Catholic saints? Analogous remarks can be made about Our Lady also called *Mātā* and the Hindu goddess *Kālī* who, in Sri Lankan folk Hinduism, is worshipped under the name of

⁶¹ Tippet, Alan R., “Conversion as a Dynamic Process in Christian Mission” in *Missiology, An International Review*. Vol. V, #2, April 1977, p. 120.

⁶² Saldanha J., *Conversion and Indian Law. op.cit.*, p. 96.

mariyamman, with different attributions in different villages. It is no wonder that one can see the pictures of Saint Anthony and Our Lady of Lanka or the Sacred Heart of Jesus alongside the pictures of the main Hindu deities in household shrines, shops, restaurants and other locations. McDowell noted that the monastery and church of Our Lady of the Hermits at Einsiedeln, in the mountains of Switzerland,⁶³ where many Tamil refugees go on pilgrimage, present votive offerings, and place a passport photograph touching the image of the Black Madonna of Einsiedeln,⁶⁴ is said by them to be a *mariyamman* shrine.⁶⁵ This remarkable correspondence is not yet supported by sufficient empirical evidence in other locations to draw a conclusion, but deserves a serious scientific study in these days of ‘inculturation’ of the Christian message and the fear of syncretism on the part of the most orthodox Christians. *Mātā* plays an important role in leading some of the Tamil refugees being studied to cross the threshold of the Christian churches; they are still worshipping *Mātā* in London, though the Pentecostal pastors abhor Roman Catholicism as much as Hinduism. The role of *Mātā* among many Sri Lankan Tamils (Catholics and Hindus alike) is exemplified in the testimony of Sinathurai. He begins the interview talking about his devotion to *Mātā* in Sri Lanka, and ends with his reluctance to leave *Mātā* worship behind, after joining the Pentecostal community in London. At the risk of side-tracking the flow of our argument, and of being repetitive, I translate his words:

I used to go to a *Mātā kōvil* (Saint Mary’s Church) in Allaipeddy. I have seen miracles taking place there among worshippers. I prayed for certain things, and they were granted. So I developed a strong faith in *Mātā*. Then, when I was in Colombo, I went also to Saint Anthony’s Church. I went to a Hindu temple on Fridays and to Saint Anthony’s Church on Tuesdays. I had a good faith in *Mātā*, but I did not know anything about Jesus. I did not want to make any difference between gods. I always worshipped all the gods, thinking that they are one.

When I decided to go to work in a Middle East country, first I went to a *Mātā* temple, gave *kāṇikkai* (offering), and prayed. There is a man who looks after the temple and I saw his wife in my dream, telling me that my wishes would be granted. I saw the same dream again after a few days. (...) My wish was fulfilled, and I went to Damam in Saudi Arabia. My faith in *Mātā* grew due to this. (...)

⁶³ See McDowell, Christopher, *A Tamil Asylum Diaspora: Sri Lankan Migration, Settlement and Politics in Switzerland*. op.cit., pp. 230-236.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

Even after coming to the UK, I continued to attend the *Mātā kōvil*. My sister, too, is a staunch believer in *Mātā*. So both of us attend regularly the *Mātā kōvil*. ***Mātā* is the mother of Jesus, so now I believe that the mother has brought me to her son Jesus. (...)**

In his new Pentecostal community Sinathurai is told that he should not worship *Mātā*, that only Jesus is God, and he owes allegiance only to Jesus. In his confused mind, Sinathurai tries a theological explanation of his devotion to *Mātā*, what Peter Berger would call a ‘structure of plausibility.’⁶⁶ He does not want to betray *Mātā*, who has been so good to him in the past; “Mary is the mother of Jesus, right? So now I believe that the mother has brought me to her son.” And he continues to worship *Mātā*; but his new faith in Jesus-God has planted the seed of doubt and confusion in his spiritual life; after narrating his misfortunes and good fortunes in London, with dreams and visions and miracles, Sinathurai concludes:

When I went to *Mātā kōvil*, I went with a particular request, and once the request was granted I never went there again unless there was another problem. But now I go to Church every Sunday and feel I am close to God now. I have more guidance and visions in my day to day life. (...) Usually I go to Hindu temples and Christian churches. I don’t see why one should be banned from places of worship. But after I started attending this church, I was told that I should not worship pictures, so I have stopped going to Hindu temples. It was a big struggle in my life, to stop praying in front of my gods. I used to light a lamp and pray to my Hindu gods; but now, because I am so confused, I do it one day and then stop it for few days. Then I feel guilty and do it again. Now I have stopped lighting the lamp, but did not remove the pictures from my room. I have also stopped wearing holy ashes. I still attend *Mātā kōvil*. But when I go to the Tamil church I pray as I am told to pray. But when I go to *Mātā kōvil*, I pray to *Mātā*. Still I keep the pictures of my gods. I do not worship them, but I did not want to remove them from my room.

Sinathurai’s testimony is self-explanatory, and his confusion very understandable; he has not gone through a disenchantment with Hinduism or disenchantment with *Mātā*; but now he is told to worship Jesus alone and to repudiate his previous allegiance to his gods and to *Mātā*. What should he do? Sinathurai finds himself in a dilemma; he must choose either-or, but not both-and. He is not alone in this. David Mandelbaum explained a similar pattern among Nadar converts in India. He pointed out that Nadar converts

⁶⁶ Berger, Peter L. & Luckmann, Thomas, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. op.cit., p. 178.

“eventually reconciled their new doctrine to the traditional system.”⁶⁷ In Sinathurai’s case, he seems to practise a ‘dual loyalty’: he worship the Hindu gods or *Mātā* on Fridays and the Christian God on Sundays. The Nadar Christians create a different model for relating the old and the new, a kind of religious symbiosis between the newly-found Christian faith and the ancestral Hindu practices of the caste. In both cases there is no evidence of the duality of conversion-aversion, because there is no repudiation of Hinduism.⁶⁸ This phenomenon of either double loyalty or symbiotic synthesis can be fruitful in its application to other fields, such as the introduction of modern technology into traditional agrarian cultures; one of the many instances is the research conducted by Srinivas, who analysed the Westernization of traditional belief systems in India, due to the introduction of Western technology into traditional communities; among the many stories found in Srinivas’ work, this one is exemplary: a bulldozer driver spends his working hours proudly exhibiting his skill and power driving his machine; in the evening the same man goes to participate and practice black magic; for him there is no conflict between the two realms of modern scientific technology and the pre-modern techniques of witchcraft: “the two sectors were kept completely ‘discrete’”.⁶⁹ If ‘conversion’ to the true God entails ‘aversion’ from the idols, then the decision to change religion should be preceded or accompanied by a disenchantment with the previous commitment; but it is not always the case, as we have seen in Sinathurai’s experience as well as in other cases of London Tamil Christians, that would be superfluous to mention.

Singam expresses a similar attitude in his religious life back in Sri Lanka, but does not mention his present stance in London:

I have a brother who became a Christian in order to marry a Christian woman. I didn’t see any difference between Hindus and Christians in my village. Some people went to temples and others went to churches.

⁶⁷ Mandelbaum, David G., *Society in India: change and continuity* (vol. 2). Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California press, 1970, p. 572.

⁶⁸ Walter Hollenweger remarks, “Pentecostals religion enabled the Toba Indians of Argentina to change from a nomadic life to that of cotton planters, without having to give up the mythical and magical conceptions which were important to them. They were able to continue these, under a Christian guise, in the new form of Pentecostal worship.” See “Islands of Humanity: A Social Assessment” in Hollenweger, Walter J., *The Pentecostals. op.cit.*, p. 458.

⁶⁹ Srinivas, M. N., *Social Change in Modern India. op.cit.*, p. 55.

Singam and his family went through hard times with the war directly affecting their village. He was a daily labourer, doing the hardest jobs, but even that work was not available to him:

My only hope was God. I was a strong Hindu, yes, but I went to all the temples and churches and asked God for help in my desperate situation. I fasted for several days and asked God's mercy on me. (...)

Now in London Singam lives in a rented room, attends his Pentecostal church regularly, no longer has suicidal urges. He is able and willing to help others, feels he is accepted, important and respected by others, and makes no mention of his previous Hinduism or of his present attitude towards Hindu religious practices in London.

Everyone of my informants has expressed a higher or lower degree of intensity and thoroughness of Hinduism permeating their lives in their villages; in some instances (Singam, Arul, Mary, Suriya), their Hinduism appears rather diluted; in others (Hanna, Swarnan) it appeared quite clearly defined; in their words, their religious practice consisted mainly in temple-going and worshipping the household gods. There is no clear mention in their testimonies of the 'myths' behind the practice of their 'rituals' as essential ingredients to guide their whole life, not only their 'religious' life. There is no evidence that they have completely deleted the religion of their ancestors in order to become Christians. Hanna, Sinathurai, Swarnan and Singam explicitly report the survival, in their lives, of Hindu elements, even some years after their incorporation into the Christian communities. It will be difficult, if not impossible with the data at hand, to assess the extent of their 'change of religion,' because we do not have X Rays to make their experience transparent and see through it; I have only scratched this ground. In a more rigorous and scientific study of a subject related to this, David Mosse concludes:

Christian converts were expected to adopt a role which was both personal and universal, rooted in the ultimate verities of the Christian faith. **But this did not demand abandonment of the ritual obligations of the social world.**⁷⁰ (My emphasis).

The researcher of this field, in the case of Pentecostal Tamils in London, can only look at their participation in their respective All-Tamil churches and listen to their testimonies about how they see it themselves; we must consider their lives as indivisible wholes, and not only the sum total of sectors or fragments; and then we shall see how the Christian

⁷⁰Mosse, David, "South Indian Christians, Purity/Impurity, and the Caste System: Death Ritual in a Tamil Catholic Community," in *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 2, #3, Sept.1996, p. 476.

religion communicated by the All-Tamil churches has penetrated and permeated their daily life, their minds and hearts and wills, their thoughts and their actions. In any case, whether the 'converts,' within themselves, are Hindus or Christians or a blend of both, is something that cannot be determined unless we give great weight and decisive importance to their community life and customs,⁷¹ which are observable to the researcher: The ethnographical method of research deals with the manifestation, not with the essence of social facts; it deals with what appears, not with what lies behind appearances.

4.7 “AFTER BECOMING A CHRISTIAN I AM ABLE TO FACE ALL THE PROBLEMS WITH COURAGE AND DETERMINATION” (SINGAM)

In the previous chapter we let our interviewees express their malaise after escaping the horrors of the war only to fall into the terrors of a prolonged culture shock, into a state of pervading confusion, and paralysing uncertainty and perplexity. After listening, recording, translating and analysing the 'generative words' they used to describe their social, cultural and spiritual predicament (the symptoms of their malaise, so to speak), we put them all under the category of **anomie**, for lack of a more accurate term. For the sake of analysis we could distribute all those generative words into two constellations gravitating around two centres, namely, **loneliness** and **meaninglessness**. Around the centre of **loneliness** we can place words and expressions such as 'isolation,' 'cut off,' 'lostness,' 'unwanted,' 'rejected,' 'alone by myself' and others; around the centre of **meaninglessness** we can place 'confusion,' 'stranger,' 'no purpose,' 'aimlessness' ("no direction or goal in my life") and several others. These two centres of gravitation are united in a continuum; one leads to the other and each is usually interpreted in terms of the other. In between these two centres, participating of the two, we can place all the expressions (some of them most revealing) that we have termed **liminality** ('split identity,' 'tug of war,' 'see-sawing on two cultures,' 'life in between,' 'neither here nor there,' etc.) and **alienation** ('we-them,' 'rejection,' 'not belonging,' 'no friends with them,' 'our culture - their culture,' including language, ways of doing things, codes of behaviour and opposing hierarchies of values). The end result of their description is expressed as an acute feeling of 'unhappiness' and 'no-peace here.'

When in our conversations they begin with the preamble "after becoming a Christian..." they use the opposite terms to describe their present state that we have termed as

⁷¹ Saldanha J., *Conversion and Indian Law. op.cit.*, p.91.

“reintegrated lives.” Something of transcendental importance has happened in their biographies: there is a marked transition from the unhappiness and no-peace they suffered before to the happiness and peace they are enjoying now. With Abraham Maslow⁷² we may call this transition a “peak experience” or, with Gennep⁷³, the “liminal stage” of their dramatic “rites of passage.” Whatever we call it, the process of religious conversion (entailing the incorporation, belonging and full participation in the communal life of the All-Tamil Pentecostal churches) had a profound therapeutic effect on the ‘converts.’⁷⁴ It is easy to detect the transformation of their lives and the transfiguration of their world view: they state that previously they were very unhappy, they went through some decisive experiences, and now they are very happy; previously they looked at the others with hostility, and at themselves with pity; now they look at them as friends and at themselves with appreciation of their own value; they felt rejected, now they feel accepted and belonging. Here we can offer only a few samples of this transformation. The readers have already noticed it, because often the interviewees describe the problem together with the solution, and sometimes they begin with the solution and then describe the problem in a flash-back. We can express their healing journey in this table:

- From loneliness to community.
- From isolation to incorporation.
- From rejection to acceptance.
- From unwantedness to welcome.
- From alienation to participation.
- From meaninglessness to purpose in life.
- From aimlessness to a destination and a goal.
- From helplessness to being helpful to others.
- From despair to hope.
- From hopelessness to courage and determination.
- From self-contempt to self-esteem.
- From restlessness to peace of mind.

⁷²For the meaning of ‘peak experience’ see footnote no. 20 above.

⁷³ Gennep, Arnold van, *Rites of Passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966, p. 11.

⁷⁴ See also “Pentecostalism as a Movement of Conscientization” in Johns, Cheryl Bridges, *Pentecostal Formation: A Pedagogy among the Oppressed*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993, pp. 62-110.

Ganesh had experienced rejection from home, unwantedness, self-hatred, loneliness, aimless wandering on the streets of London, and despair. He had developed a very low self-esteem in his dejection. But now, on the contrary,

Ganesh: I became a Christian in 1990. (...) I found a family in the church. (...) The church became my family and my identity. I was able to find my feet in Britain. That alone is enough to say that Jesus Christ is alive. The church has become a family, brother and sister, mother and father, relations, belonging, love, care and concern. Most important, now you know that you count and are important, and that there is someone waiting for you to take care of you. (...) This is the optimism and upliftment we have in Christianity.

Me: As a Christian, did you feel you were something special?

Ganesh: Yes. As a Christian I carry a slogan to show that I belong to the international Christian family. (...) I made a lot of friends in the church. I give my testimony even in the majority white church, and the white people come and hug me. They invite me to their homes for a meal; as Christians their lives and attitudes have changed and they accept you in the Lord. This is a family....

Me: Are you, then, better off than before?

Ganesh: Yes indeed. As a Christian I was able to find my identity and restore my personality. I was able to gain my confidence and build on that.

Me: Even as an Asian?

Ganesh: Yes, even as an Asian, even in the white church. You know that you are accepted.

Two years later (July 1999) I met Ganesh again and we had a long informal chat. He is equally fervid in his commitment and his expressions are equally vibrant. Together with other like-minded Christians he is now engaged in a kind of non-official ministry of reconciliation and peace between Tamils and Sinhalese in London, and is a bridge builder between Sri Lankans and British people and their cultures. His life looks full of clear purpose and firm determination.

Singam comes from an economically disinherited family in Sri Lanka. He paints a dark picture of his life in London: confused, meaningless, lost in an ocean. He became a Christian at the point of seriously considering to commit suicide. Suddenly the tone of his voice changes and speaks with animation and relish; we highlight his generative words:

Singam: After becoming a Christian I was able to face all the problems with courage and determination. (...) I am able to face anything now with God's help and guidance. (...) I firmly believe that God has brought me to this country with a **purpose**. He loved me and wanted me to experience the abundant life that he was offering. (...) When I go out among British people I see a great amount of **acceptance** and

respect for Christian people. British people believe that Christians are honest people and not trouble makers. I see this all the time in my life. When I meet officers in the income support department, work place, British churches, and in personal encounters, they **accept** you and treat you as one of them. (...) When British people are ready to **accept** you, then they don't look at your shortcomings. They help you to understand the British culture and lifestyle in a positive way. Once that happens, you are not a **stranger** anymore.

Singam had experienced rejection from friends and unwantedness from relatives in London; he developed a sense of alienation, and rejection of others; by rejecting others, he rejected himself and had a death-wish that was leading him to suicide. After becoming a Christian he felt accepted and respected by others; this led him to self-acceptance and self-respect; he has discovered a purpose to his life, and is pursuing this purpose "with courage and determination"; he no longer feels a stranger, alienated; his personality has been reintegrated, as Ganesh felt that his personality "has been restored."

The thought of insanity emerges quite often in our conversations (Ratnam, Jothi, Hanna, Ganesh, Singam), and participation in the community life of the Christian churches is mentioned as a refuge from insanity and as a compensation for what they lack in the wider society. Let us take the case of Ratnam the solicitor. He reflects on the degradation of Sri Lankan workers in London; many have to resign themselves to undesirable jobs, even when they are qualified for a more dignified ones. Ratnam regrets the general lack of recognition, respect and dignity in one's employment; this could lead him to insanity, but the Christian community offers him a sort of compensation:

Ratnam: The civil engineers, teachers and clerical servants are the most affected without proper jobs in the UK. They are educated and were doing well in Sri Lanka. But in the UK they find it difficult to do menial jobs, thinking that it will spoil their image and dignity in the Tamil society. How long can they starve for their dignity? I have seen civil engineers working in petrol stations here. Solicitors and medical doctors are lucky, because they are in demand here. (...)

Me: You are a solicitor. Are you happy here?

Ratnam: If you ask me if I am happy, I would say that I am not. I am not happy at all. In Sri Lanka my social life provided happiness, but in London only my Christian life provides me happiness. I wouldn't have survived in this country without going insane for a long time if I didn't have Christ in my life. Christ gave me a new approach to life. I have good friends in the church. I can visit them, they can visit me. (...)

One can hear expressions such as "God has a plan for me" (Hanna), or "I believe that God brought me to this country with a purpose" (Mary, after narrating the conversion of all the remaining members of her family), or "Now I have a goal and direction in my

life,” “God is guiding my life to a goal,” and similar ones. One gets the impression that the Tamil refugees in the Pentecostal communities have found a purposeful meaning to their lives and feel that they are here for some reason beyond mere historical accidents, that they envision a goal to achieve beyond the mere survival, and so their lives have meaning and purpose. The congregations still give signs of the same vibrant vitality, are growing in numbers, and are tentatively (and steadily) introducing some English into the worshipping services. Some modes of behaviour that would be dysfunctional in the wider society (such as over-shouting those praying in public, interrupting the preacher with ejaculations such as “I love you, Jesus!”, clapping, thumping of feet, rolling on the floor with foaming of the mouth and speaking in strange tongues), are permitted and even encouraged in the Christian community; the subjects of those phenomena find a compensatory satisfaction in the emotional release of their feelings (catharsis), accepted by the community, though some members expressed to me their scepticism about the real spiritual value of that behaviour. In one of the communities there has been a split, and the most ‘enthusiastic’ members have withdrawn to form their own rigid exclusivistic group around a fiery preacher. But as a whole the Tamil Pentecostal congregations in London give the impression of being healthy communities composed of healthy individuals and families. There is no doubt in the researcher’s mind that the communities have been instrumental for in reintegration and healthy restoration of the shattered lives of many Tamil refugees longing for a community where they could belong, preserve their own Tamil identity, and sing the joy of being alive.

It is true that there is no Christian psychotherapy, as there is no Christian medicine, or Christian physics. E. Anker Nilsen’s writes conspicuously on this:

Religion and psychotherapy are not opposites. Some kinds of religion are not therapeutic, and some kinds of therapy are not religious. On the other hand, the Christian religion means to be therapeutic and hopefully accomplishes this end to the glory of God. And hopefully psychotherapy is on the way to accepting religion as something which can be an integrative factor in the health and development of personality.⁷⁵

There has been a tendency to reserve the ‘natural’ to psychotherapy and the ‘supernatural’ to religion and theology. Duncan B. Forrester reacts vigorously against such a simplistic dichotomy of body/soul, action/contemplation, and similar oppositions:

⁷⁵Nilsen, E. Anker, *Religion and Personality Integration. op.cit.*, p. 149.

The Christian theologian nurtures a distinctive unease with this kind of dualistic thought. He cannot accept the philosopher's depreciation of action which runs so deep, nor the suspicion of emotion. On the other hand, the theologian does not reverse the classical priorities; rather he must transcend the duality. For he knows that understanding and doing, reason and emotion - and especially loving and knowing - are integrally related and interdependent.⁷⁶

Perhaps it was Viktor E. Frankl, the survivor of several Nazi concentration camps, the psychiatrist who has insisted most forcefully and convincingly on the reciprocal need of psychotherapy and religion if they are going to be true to their respective goals and functions. In the Introduction to his seminal book *The Doctor and the Soul* he offers us his fundamental presupposition of what makes us fully human:

Man lives in three dimensions: the somatic, the mental and the spiritual. The spiritual dimension cannot be ignored, for it is what makes us human. To be concerned about the meaning of life is not necessarily a sign of disease or neurosis.⁷⁷

In our previous chapter we saw how Tamil refugees described their lives in London as lonely lives and how they were "in desperate need of a friend" (Mary). In his clinical and anecdotal book *Escape from Loneliness*⁷⁸ the Swiss author Paul Tournier sees loneliness as one of the main roots of modern psycho-pathology, and the incorporation into the appropriate communities one of the main forces leading to a healthy restoration of personality; characteristically, the original title of his book was "From Solitude to Community"; man is constitutionally a social animal and longs for communion with others. A similar insight we find in Eric Fromm, the Freudo-Marxist psychiatrist. What for Tournier is "solitude," or "loneliness," for Fromm is "moral aloneness," and what for Tournier is "quest for community" is for Fromm "the need to belong." Both fundamentally agree that by nature their clients desire to be fully human, and that this desire will be realised only by their belong to and fully participating in the life of a community, religious or otherwise. Frankl experienced the extreme frontiers of human endurance and survived because at all moments he believed that there was meaning (purpose) in his life, in his joys and in his sufferings, in his living and in his dying; he could verify that, in the concentration camps, those who were tenaciously clinging to

⁷⁶Forrester, Duncan B.(ed.), *Theology and Practice*. London: Epworth Press, 1990, p. 6.

⁷⁷Frankl, Viktor E., *The Doctor and the Soul. An Introduction to Logotherapy*. London: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.,1957, p. IX.

⁷⁸Tournier, Paul, *Escape from Loneliness*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962.

some meaning and purpose in their lives were more likely to survive than those who had lost meaning and purpose and consequently were prone to give up hope. The method of his logotherapy is to help the client to find the meaning (purpose) of his own life, not to inject the therapist's meaning into the lives of their clients.

Paul Tillich the theologian coincides with Eric Fromm when he says that, by being incorporated to a human totalitarian mass, a person may lose his own identity by dissolving it in that mass (Tillich) or may abdicate his freedom by following the herd (Fromm); there is a political mode of totalitarianism, and also there is a religious modality of totalitarianism both in the 'sects' (sectarianism) and in the 'churches' (dogmatism). Both authors would agree that this is a pathological mode of belonging to a human mass or a human herd. Yet, without denying the possibility of political or religious 'conversion' being a decision to abdicate one's identity, freedom and responsibility in leaving it to others ("the Party knows better," or "the Church knows better," "my Country right or wrong"), we must emphatically state that, in the case of deciding to join the Christian communities and worshipping Jesus-God, my interviewees have preserved their identity and freedom to decide for themselves, and assumed their responsibilities "with courage and determination". Their decision required what Tillich called "the courage to be as a part,"⁷⁹ and the process and decision to be part of their communities had a profound therapeutic effect on their personalities.

Our findings in the individual biographies of our interviewees confirm the findings of those three psychiatrists, Tournier the practising Christian, Frankl the believing Jew, and Fromm the Marxist humanist, that the incorporation, belonging and full participation in their Christian communities have had a profound therapeutic effect among Tamil refugees in reintegrating their shattered and fragmented lives in London. In drawing my attention to their Pentecostal communities as such, and not only to individuals in them, this conclusion was reinforced two years after my field work was completed and the interviews were recorded. I do not pretend that these conclusions are applicable to all other cases in different times and places; it is enough to conclude that if it has happened in this desperate situation, it can also happen in other cases, whether the subjects are refugees or not, Tamil or not, Pentecostal or not.

⁷⁹See Tillich, Paul, *The Courage to Be. op.cit.*, pp. 86-90.

4.8 CONCLUSION

There is an observable linguistic pattern in the narratives of my interviewees concerning their transition from Hindu religion into Christian religion. When they look forward at Christianity from outside, from the perspective of their Hindu temple-going religious practice, they use the expression “change my religion” quite consistently in utterances like “I did not want to change my religion,” or “This ‘miracle’ did not move me to change my religion” and so forth; but when they look backwards from the perspective of their present Christian church-going religious practice, they use consistently the expression “after becoming a Christian”; between the “change my religion” and “becoming a Christian” lies the process that led them to the peak experience of baptism.

This linguistic peculiarity may give us a hint of the nature, extent and consequences of the religious ‘conversion’ or religious ‘emigration’ of our samples; their conversion is much more than a mere “change of religion” if we take it to mean a paradigm shift of religious formalities; when they introduce the expression “after becoming a Christian,” they begin to paint a bright picture of their present enjoyment of peace and happiness, and of a glowing light illuminating their future; their lives have been reintegrated or restored, not only in the spiritual realm, but also in the social, moral, intellectual and even political spheres of the integral reality which is human life; they look at themselves differently, and have a different view of the world around them; their present life is meaningful and their activities are purposeful. Now they belong to a community and are happy to belong somewhere; they are no longer helpless, they are beginning to be helpful to others who are in the same predicament as they were “before becoming a Christian”; their previously darkened horizons have been enlightened with a new, unexpected light; and now they are glad to tell others that “I was what you are, you shall be what I am now” in their invitations to friends and relatives to “become a Christian” like themselves; they do not instigate others to “change their religion,” they rather invite them to “become Christians.” Conversion, then, entails not only a “change of religion,” but a significant transformation of their personalities.

Another pattern that appears quite consistently is the description of a state ‘before’ and a state ‘after’; before, I was living in loneliness, misery, unhappiness, etc.; after, I live now a life of happiness and peace. Something of transcendental importance has happened to them between the ‘before’ and the ‘after.’ The ‘before’ was a state of anomie, the ‘after’ is a state of reintegration. It is safe to conclude that, if the state of anomie is a pre-condition and a main factor leading to suicide (Durkheim), it can equally well be a pre-

condition and a main factor leading to religious conversion as an escape and refuge away from the terror of anomie (Berger).

In none of the cases under study do we find a sense of guilt (real or imaginary), or a definition of conversion as a Divine-human encounter or covenant resulting in the forgiveness of sins with the sequel of a new and unexpected state of bliss in friendship with God. Though they often use the expression “born again,” they never openly imply a transition of “life under sin” to a state of “life under grace.”

In practically all the cases under study there was a severe, prolonged crisis preceding and accompanying the process of religious conversion; but once they have uttered the expression “after becoming a Christian” one can detect only some vestiges of that crisis in the informants’ narratives; the obvious inference is that their crises have been resolved in their new life as part of the “Christian family”. Previously their lives were marked by severe conflicts, both psychological and internal, and social and external; a conflict within themselves and with others, with Sinhalese, with the white British population, with Tamil professionals, with wealthy relatives and so forth; but “after becoming a Christian” everyone confesses that their conflicts have been happily resolved or in an advanced process of resolution (“After becoming a Christian I can face all problems with courage and determination”); so it is safe to conclude that their incorporation and participation in the life of the Tamil Pentecostal communities have served as shock-absorbers first, and eventually as catalysts for the restoration of their personality and consequent healthy growth in a different soil; salvation has come to them as a holistic healing process of their wounded souls and of their entire personalities in all the spheres of their lives.

CHAPTER 5:

CONSOLIDATION

5.1 EXPLANATORY INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter we focused our attention on the narratives of the process and the event of religious conversion among Tamil refugees, and tried to analyse their experiences from different angles in order to understand their own internalisation of that transcendental event in their biographies, with the consequences that it entailed. Tamil converts narrated with intensity, the nature and the outcome of their religious change. The religious change did not end with the peak experience of receiving baptism by total immersion and changing their names to signify the changing of their personalities. It led them to a radical transfiguration of the way they see themselves and the world around them, of their internal and external reality. Before their conversion they painted a gloomy picture of themselves and their world, with a darkened horizon; after conversion the picture brightens and their horizon clears in a kind of new dawn for their lives.

In the previous chapters we concentrated attention on the individuals. In this chapter we shall look at their Christian communities to find out how these are being consolidated by adapting and re-adapting themselves, their programmes and activities, to the changing reality of Tamil life in London. Since a good number of them live in London with their nuclear families or have formed a family in their exile, we may expect that the changing shape of their families sooner or later will be reflected in some adaptative changes introduced in their Pentecostal communities. This chapter is written two years after the interviews were taken and the main observations were recorded in my field notes. I visited those communities on some special occasions during the year 1998, when I was invited to weddings and anniversaries, and also to take participate in some of their religious services. In 1999 I re-visited some of the communities, lived for a longer period at the house of a refugee family, attended some get-togethers, had long informal chats with some of my previous interviewees, church leaders and pastors. I observed their life together, with my eyes open, in order to make a comparison between the 'before' (1998) and the 'now' (1999). I repeatedly observed that some pressing questions were emerging regarding **a)** the concern about the preservation and perpetuation of Tamil identity in individual families and in the Tamil Pentecostal congregations; **b)** the "language issue," that is, the gradual introduction of some English into the Sunday community worship; **c)**

the problems raised by the numerical success in practically all the congregations; **d)** the methods, programmes and activities to strengthen the faith of the believers and to attract new members and **e)** the progressive transition from the spontaneous, seemingly disordered way of conducting the services towards a more sober and orderly discipline in worship, testimonies, speaking in tongues, preaching and listening to sermons. They claim that there is no fixed pattern of worship in their assemblies, but a regular observer with one foot inside and the other outside¹ will detect that there is a recurrent chain of events that forms a pattern, and therefore there is some predictability in what is going to happen every Sunday in their assemblies; in other words, there is a good measure of 'routine' in them. We could call it a transition from spontaneity to regulation, from enthusiasm to administration, from the "sect type" to a "church type,"² or from "charisma to routine."³

5.2 PRESSING ISSUES

5.2.1 TAMIL IDENTITY

The problem of continuance in preserving the Tamil identity of refugees long was already anticipated by several in passing references,⁴ and most explicitly by Jeya (in her

¹ According to Paul Tillich, the theologian needs to have a foot inside (active faith) and the other foot outside (scientific detachment) in the study of religious matters; the very subject matter of his study requires it. See Tillich, Paul, *Systematic Theology*. (in one single vol.), London: Nisbet, 1968.

² The distinction between "sect type" and "church type" (parallel to the Weberian "charisma" and "routine") was introduced by one of Max Weber's disciples, the theologian and historian Ernst Troeltsch in his massive work *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*. *op.cit.*, pp. 331-343.

³ For the concepts of "charisma" and "routine" and "routinization of charisma" I depend on Max Weber, in his *The Theory of Economic and Social Organisation*; (tr.) A.M. Henderson & Talcott Parsons. Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1957, pp. 363-373. See also the important collection of Weber's papers in Eisenstadt, S.N. (ed.), *Max Weber on Charisma and Institution Building - Selected Papers*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1968.

⁴ For example, Arul the university student who is fluent in both languages, remarks with some sadness: "Most of the Tamils feel that it is better to adhere to our culture, which is the more appropriate thing to do. For how long will it possible? That's something that I don't know."

early twenties) and Kumar, one of the young pastors I often met. In a collective interview, this is a sample of their exchange:

Jeya: I also feel that our cultural emphasis and heritage will disappear after some time. Not just things like traditional dress, ceremonies, etc., but our very life style will change drastically. Even Tamil grocery shops and Tamil public gatherings for entertainment will also change. Our children won't definitely speak Tamil.

Kumar: People who came here when they were 15 and above will maintain the Tamil language and identity, but not others. We may be able to find someone who can speak in Tamil for another 50 to 100 years, but writing in the Tamil language will stop. People who talk, insist and are proud of the Tamil language will eventually be only elderly people.

Jeya anticipates a total assimilation and consequent absorption of the entire *kalāccāram* in the near future; Kumar is almost certain that the Tamil language in London will be lost in two generations or so. Two years after this conversation we find that the process of acculturation, especially among Tamil school children and the young Tamils working among British people, is advancing at a fast pace. This has taken many members of the Pentecostal communities unawares. They have to recognise the fact and its implications for the introduction of changes in the manner of conducting their worship services and educational programmes. It is a new challenge, a crossroad; many possibilities are open. By far the most crucial issue is the question of language in the life of the community, whether Tamil only, or English on the same footing as Tamil, or English permitted only to a limited extent.

5.2.2 THE LANGUAGE ISSUE

One of the most painful changes is the drift from the revered Tamil language to the language of the wider society which, for the elders, is still a foreign language. To some extent it can be said that Sri Lankan Tamils fought a war because they wanted to preserve their language against the totalitarian threat of the "Sinhala Only Act"; because of the war they suffered exile and came to London; now they reflect with sadness, but a matter of fact, that their children are, losing that language in defence of which so many people died tragically in Sri Lanka; they fear that their situation in London will not be "Sinhala Only," but "English Only." Perhaps they wonder: What is the difference?

The first possibility is rejection of English, attempted by some small congregations. Some insist tenaciously on retaining Tamil as the sole language of the Pentecostal community, even for Sunday School, where practically all the children are more fluent in

English than in Tamil, and all are unable to read Tamil; in the minds of concerned Tamil parents, the Sunday School would serve a dual purpose, primarily to educate their children in the rudiments of Christianity, but also importantly, lead them interact with other Tamil children and thus improve their deteriorating use of the language. This attempt proved to be a losing battle and the Sunday Schools in Tamil were discontinued to give place to English as the main language of instruction.

The second possibility is the blending of Tamil and English in the worship service. When English is used officially, as in the case of English-speaking guest preachers, there is always a simultaneous translation into Tamil. Some churches have seriously considered introducing bilingual services on regular basis for worship, and are now experimenting with ways of carrying on the change, if it proves satisfactory.

The third possibility is to have All-Tamil services at one time or in one room, and All-English services in another room or at a different time. This solution has been introduced in one congregation that, reportedly, counts some 500 members. Some people have remarked to me that this solution is possible only in large congregations, but would be divisive and in the long run have adverse effects in smaller worshipping communities.

5.2.3 SUCCESS MANAGEMENT

All the Tamil Pentecostal communities in London have sprung out of nothing; in a sense, we can say that all of them are numerical “success stories.” They have sprung and grown very quickly in the first few years of existence. We saw how many individuals solved their problems “after becoming a Christian” and now their lives seem reintegrated, healthy, and reaching Christian maturity, not only as individuals, but also in specific Christian communities. The Pentecostal Tamil communities in London form a loose federation of autonomous communities; there is among them no common pattern of ethos, worship, administration and distribution of power, no rules or ways or laws imposed upon them from above or from outside; there is a sense of freedom, spontaneity, intimacy (“we are like a family”), and mutual affection and support; each individual counts and is important as a child of God and a brother/sister in the community. There is among them a “hierarchy of service” and a “hierarchy of love,” rather than a “hierarchy of power.” Tamil Pentecostal communities display most of the distinctive “characteristic features” that Troeltsch discovers in his historical and comparative study of the Sect-Type as contrasted with the Church-Type:

... example of Jesus, the subjective work of the apostles and the pattern of their life of poverty, and unites the religious individualism preached

by the Gospel with the religious fellowship, in which the office of the ministry is not based upon ecclesiastical ordination and tradition, but upon religious service and power, and which therefore can also devolve entirely upon laymen.⁵

This ideal can be achieved only in small clusters of communities where the members live together or in proximity to each other; but this is becoming more and more difficult to achieve now among London Pentecostal Tamils: their religious communities in some cases are becoming too large to form a true “Christian family” and many of the members are separated from each other by geographical distance within the city of London. Therefore some accommodation of the ideal to the real is becoming inevitable, as in the case of every biological or social organism in the process of development and growth. Troeltsch continues his analysis:

It is this point of view, [radical obedience to God’s command as found in the Scriptures], however, which makes the sects incapable of forming large mass organisations, and limits their development to small groups, united on a basis of personal intimacy; it is also responsible for the necessity for a constant renewal of the ideal, their lack of continuity, their pronounced individualism, and their affinity with all the oppressed and idealistic groups within the lower classes.⁶

When development and growth become unmanageable with the application of the original principles of freedom, spontaneity and intimacy, some alteration or compromise becomes inevitable: spontaneity gives the place to regulation, Divine law becomes Church law, vitality and energy have to be channelled by administration, charisma develops into routine.⁷ On occasions the all-loving pastor becomes an all-controlling

⁵ See Troeltsch, Ernst, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*. as found in Schneider, Louis, *op.cit.*, p. 465.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 461.

⁷ See Roelofs, Gerard, “Charismatic Christian Thought: Experience, Metonymy, and Routinization” in Poewe, Karla, *Charismatic Christianity as a Global Culture*. South Carolina: University of South Carolina press, 1994, pp. 227-30.

ruler,⁸ and the 'sects' become 'churches' or 'denominations.'⁹ This is happening at least in the largest Tamil Pentecostal communities in London.

Usually the transition does not come smoothly, without conflict. More often than not it entails a severe strife between the traditionalists and the innovators, which in some not infrequent cases results in a schism and the creation of splinter groups. This conflict is exemplified in the well-known variance between the Jerusalem Christian 'sect' led by James the Brother of the Lord, and the 'catholic,' universalistic and all-inclusive 'churches' (both Jews and Gentiles) founded by Paul.¹⁰ The conflict was resolved in the Apostolic Council of Jerusalem, with a compromise between the two parties representing two extremes. I hear reports of conflict in different Tamil churches due to opposing views on accommodation to the newly emerging reality, adaptation of the community activities to meet that reality, innovation in methods of evangelisation, worship and teaching, and administration of the increasing power and authority in the hands of the Tamil Pentecostal communities. There has been a split in one of the congregations around the question of authority and the preservation of the original 'purity' of the community; some of the members have formed a splinter community. The original membership is now divided "fifty-fifty" among the two groups. The following example illustrates the relationship between the original ethos, the new needs and opportunities, the emerging evangelistic policies, and some people's reactions to the new out coming shape of the communities.

There is a steady growth in numbers in practically all of them. This seems paradoxical. The flow of Sri Lankan Tamils coming to settle in London is subsiding¹¹; at the same

⁸This is illustrated and verified in the following recent anecdote. I heard that another solicitor had been converted from Hinduism to Pentecostal Christianity and had joined one of the communities under study. I wanted to contact him to obtain some further information on legal matters about the changing laws concerning refugees and asylum granting, as well as other details concerning the Pentecostal Church. He told me clearly and unequivocally: "If you want information about professional matters, I will gladly give it to you; but if you intend to gather information on anything related to Christianity, I cannot give you any without the Pastor's authorisation."

⁹See Niebuhr, Richard, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*. Hamden, Conn.: The Shoe String Press, 1954, pp. 26-33, as found in Schneider, Louis, *op.cit.*, pp. 466-69. Also see Wilson, Bryan R., "An Analysis of Sect Development," in *American Sociological Review*, 24 February 1959, pp. 3-15. Reprinted in Schneider, Louis, *op. cit.*, pp. 482-487.

¹⁰ Acts 15: 1-35 and Paul's recollection of the events in Galatians 2.

¹¹ See Asylum statistics: Appendix III.

time the Hindu leaders are strengthening the organisation of Hindus around newly erected temples or churches bought to be converted into temples; and yet the number of Tamils joining the Pentecostal churches is increasing, though not by leaps. Is there a greater evangelistic effort to convert Hindus? My information suggests that the new influx into the Tamil Pentecostal churches does not come only or even mainly from new converts among Tamils already settled in London, but from new waves of Tamils coming from other European nations, such as Switzerland, Germany and the Scandinavian countries. Many of the applications for political asylum lodged in those countries have been rejected; a good number of them have already been deported, and others are afraid of being deported as well. As they do not want to go back to Sri Lanka, they cross frontiers from one country to another (the reader will remember the case of Sathivel, “the Wandering Tamil”) and many end up coming to London, smuggled in trucks transported from France in the channel ferries. Once in Great Britain, they apply for political asylum. While their applications are being processed, they are not given assistance in money, as regular asylum seekers, but in food vouchers. According to all the reports I hear, their destitution is truly appalling. An authoritative source describes the case in this way:

Asylum seekers currently supported under the National Assistance Act 1948 receive very basic services - a roof over their heads, a bed, food. They have no money to buy any other essentials. With no additional extra cash resources to what was being spent in the previous system, organising ‘support in kind’ on a national scale will spread those resources even thinner.¹²

(...) Asylum seekers will be made only one offer of accommodation and support somewhere in the UK - if they refused this offer they would be entitled to no other state support. (...) asylum seekers would be expected to first find their own means of support, or look to their friends, relatives or communities.¹³

And this is when the Tamil Pentecostal churches come into the new picture. The Tamil churches have established a “care ministry” to assist others in need; it is an ongoing programme to help the needy; thus the Tamil Christians can do for others what others had previously done for them. They spot the new refugees in their distress, visit them, help them with some emergency assistance (material or moral), and invite them to attend

¹² Refugee Council, Briefing on the Government’s Immigration and Asylum White Paper. *op.cit.*, p. 4.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

the Pentecostal services to meet friendly Sri Lankan Tamils with whom they can socialise. This “care ministry” has attracted and is still attracting many new seekers, some of whom have been converted or are about to receive baptism. I asked one of those converted and fully incorporated into one of the Pentecostal communities: Why did you become a Christian? His answer was:

I came alone, without support or belongings. Did anyone from the Hindu Temple come to see me? Not even the Hindu priest. Only Pastor Kumar came to see me and helped me in my distress. What’s wrong in following Pastor Kumar?

Others tell me of similar cases. Many converted Tamils (Vimalan, Suriya and like minded others) welcome this effective approach as a God sent opportunity to “share the good news” and by so doing maintaining the original enthusiasm and ideal of the communities. For others, this is an improper way of adding new members to the community, because they think that the churches are using material help in order to bring more people to the fold. The most vehement opponent to this approach is Jothi. In a recent long conversation she stated several times that she was really unhappy about the present trend of the All-Tamil Pentecostal churches in London; in her opinion the Pentecostal churches serving Tamil refugees are becoming something like assistance distribution agencies, rather than loving communities. Jothi interprets that the present asylum policy of the British government allows new refugees to receive super market food vouchers¹⁴ instead of cash payments. According to her, the Tamil Churches meet the new refugees, give them clothes and accommodation and impel them (“force them” in Jothi’s words) to attend their Christian worship services. Jothi thinks that the churches are forcing the poor refugees to abandon their gods and change their religion in exchange for some economic assistance. The number of new people attending Tamil churches has increased rapidly. Jothi refutes this approach: “this is merely increasing the numbers”. She further said:

The newcomers are coming not because they are interested in Christianity, but because we give them clothes and accommodation. Why can’t we give them space to make their own decision? This is not sharing the good news and I am angry about it.

¹⁴ A Tamil refugee, Rajan, who came to the UK in October 1998 receives £ 35.00 worth of weekly supermarket vouchers.

Her protest to the pastor created a strain between her and the church leadership, and she has decided to withdraw her active involvement in this programme. For Jothi, you can introduce management into most things, but you cannot establish a management of Christian love; management means using means to an end; Christian love is an end in itself, not a means to “increase the numbers” of converts. In Jothi’s mind, previously the mutual aid was spontaneous, with no other end in sight; assistance comes out of love and concern, and so it is an end in itself; now assistance is planned and almost ‘official’; it may be instrumentalised to serve a purpose and an end beyond itself; this is one of the marks of transition from spontaneity to planned administration, from the ‘sect-type’ to the ‘church-type.’

5.2.4 STRENGTHENING THE FAITH

My more recent observations suggest that the Tamil communities under study are struggling to maintain or renew the initial spirit of freedom, spontaneity, intimacy and mutual care. In this they are not new or special in the history of human associations, religious or not. After the pangs of birth and the joys of growth and expansion, Christian communities, like all other organisms, have the pressing need of renewal, invigoration and consolidation; otherwise they will fall into inertia and become victims of the dissolving entropy. Tamil Pentecostal communities are no exception. Like the nascent apostolic Christian community, after the first enthusiasm and euphoria, they need to keep the body of believers intact, without falling apart by falling back to paganism (or strict Judaism in the case of Galatians, Hinduism in the case of London Tamils), by descending down into apathy and inertia (the pervading religious indifferentism of most British society), or gravitating to other communities, enticed by preachers of novelties and competing messages of salvation (Gnostic sects in New Testament times, New Religious Movements in our times). We see this in the late Apostolic times and in the post-apostolic era, when the Christian community gradually shifted from a Jewish sect into an all-inclusive Catholic Church. The initial *kerygma* (apostolic proclamation) leads to apostolic *parenesis* (exhortation), and apostolic *parenesis* leads naturally to apostolic *didache* (apostolic teaching, equivalent to our modern “Christian education”). The same process can be detected in the young Tamil Pentecostal churches in London. Perhaps the only difference with other religious movements is that, in our case, the successful expansion has come very soon, perhaps sooner than anticipated.

The threat to disintegrate the body of believers is three-fold: by defection from the faith (‘apostasy’ or ‘backsliding’), by cooling down the initial enthusiasm (‘apathy’ or ‘burnt out’), by joining competing alternative messages of salvation and worshipping

communities ('heresy' or 'falling away,' a breach in the body, the most fearful of all threats). Apostasy of many leads to decline and slow death; apathy leads to decay and eventual dissolution; heresy and schism lead to fragmentation of the body into tiny conventicles. The sub-apostolic Church used a threefold means of keeping the integration of the body of believers and avoiding its decline, decay and fragmentation: a) by warnings about the impending crisis as something already predicted; b) by threats against the backsliders; c) by promises to those who persevere in their faithfulness to the end, even to martyrdom. We present here only a few New Testament texts as tokens:

a) Warning about the impending crisis.

The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.¹⁵

b) Threats against backsliders:

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they have crucified the Son of God all over again, subjecting him to public disgrace.¹⁶

c) Promises to those who persevere to the end:

Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.¹⁷

The number of 'seekers' in every Tamil Pentecostal community is considerable; every Sunday new faces are seen, the newcomers are publicly acknowledged by their names, welcomed with applause, and hugged by some of the members. They may come again and stay in the community for some time; some of them may decide to be incorporated, others just leave without a notice or a word of thanks. People consider it quite normal, something to be expect. Satha's testimony in this respect is worth repeating:

¹⁵ 1 Tim. 4.1.(NIV)

¹⁶ Hebrews 6.4-6. (NIV)

¹⁷ Revelation 2.10. (NIV)

When I went to church for the first time, I went with a worldly need. It was a simple sickness. I expected the church to meet my need. This was fulfilled and my faith in Christ grew, and that made me to continue my link with the church and later to become a Christian. That's the general criterion. But some people leave the church once their needs are fulfilled.

Satha says that most of the people stay, and only some leave; perhaps it is the other way round. Not everybody is as magnanimous as Satha. Others try to manipulate the new comers or receivers of assistance with what we may call the mechanics of guilt, by making the defectors feel guilty of ingratitude, of selfishness, of "mocking God." This anecdote illustrates the point. Recently I had an informative chat with one of the Tamil Pentecostal pastors in his home. At one point the pastor remembered that he had to make a telephone call. I could not avoid hearing the conversation from this end of the line. From the pastor's words I gathered that he was calling a refugee who had come to the congregation without a job, received hospitality and some material assistance from the community for several months attending the Sunday religious services. Finally he got a job and ceased attending the religious services and his association with the community. The pastor's final words were very clear to me and I fixed them in my memory:

Don't you know that you came and God blessed you? But for the last three weeks I haven't seen you in church. If you received the blessings from God and then left his church, things may go wrong with you; don't come back to me if things go wrong with you and say that you need help. God is not a laughing matter; we cannot play with God.

How do the communities manage to keep the believers from falling away? There is no organised programme or committee to serve this purpose. In a recent interview this dialogue ensued:

Me: Suppose you missed church attendance for two consecutive Sundays. What is likely to happen?

Jessie: There will be telephone calls on Monday.

Me: Who will call you?

Jessie: Oh! My husband's brother, my friends... and also the Pastor.

Me: What will they say?

Jessie: The usual thing... Why did you not come to church? Are you sick or something? May I visit you? I hope to see you next Sunday.

Me: And if somebody decides to withdraw from the church?

Jessie: Some time ago a leader had an argument and the problem was openly discussed in the church. Some people were on his side, others on the side of the Pastor. There was no agreement, and the leader with his group left the church.

Me: They formed another church or something?

Jessie: No. They joined another Pentecostal church. The text of the sermon the following Sunday was that “Many are called, but few are chosen.”

This dialogue indicates that the mutual support, strengthening and exhortations to perseverance come from the community itself, and so far they do not need any special committee, programme or planned activities to keep them inside the sheepfold. I have never heard a single instance of promises of rewards in heaven or threats of punishments in hell to attract or to maintain.

As we mentioned above there are prayer meetings, Bible studies, discussion groups, taking place in different homes; these are not organised by the churches; they spring up spontaneously, and attendance is strictly voluntary. Attendance is usually reduced to a group of friends (Ratnam and Chandran mention these meetings in their interviews). There are also official prayer meetings, Bible studies and discussion groups sponsored and duly announced by the individual churches every Sunday, and they may take place in the church building or in individual homes; everybody is invited to attend them.

There are also ongoing programmes of Christian education sponsored and organised by the federation of Pentecostal churches in London, an umbrella that includes English and other ethnic churches, among them Tamils; attenders at those programmes may learn about the history of their church, doctrinal tenets, the church order and discipline. Sometimes they are full-day programmes; pastors and leaders are encouraged to attend on a monthly basis. Only leaders and members with active roles in the communities attend those programmes. The teachers are English-speaking people (all of them Pentecostals), belonging to the Pentecostal federation that initially sponsored and is still now partially supporting the Tamil Pentecostal churches. This new federated programme suggests that the individual congregations are no longer totally (not 100%) autonomous in questions of doctrine or church order and discipline, and the federated churches are moving towards a closer growing together, though still far from uniformity.

5.2.5 FROM CHARISMA TO ROUTINE

The remarks made so far in this chapter indicate that there is a trend towards organisation, through the information available so far does not warrant the statement that the process from charisma to routine is advanced. I can perceive some indications of a trend in that the communities are moving towards more regularity and less spontaneity; for instance, in one of the communities the Pastor told a member: “No. You cannot speak in tongues at this moment.” This Pastor prefers each thing in its own time, order and

regularity in the worshipping services. This transition that we can now observe as a trend was anticipated by Chandran in his interview two years ago, with fear and apprehension; Chandran is the most restless of my interviewees, always the subject of an unconquerable dream, always in the pursuit of an unachievable goal. Chandran, the ex-militant who came to the UK to work for the betterment of the life of the Tamils in Sri Lanka, now feels that the 'charismatic' character of Tamil Pentecostal communities has become 'routine' (his own words) during the past two years. Earlier in 1997 he had expressed his fear that "if we continue growing like this, once our local church becomes bigger and bigger, then all things will become a routine. I don't think this will help anyone." Chandran's expression, and other similar ones, came in the context of his understanding of religions as institutions, and consequently as potential instruments of oppression, not of liberation. Chandran said, and insisted, that all religions, as established institutions, are equal: they can be equal instruments of oppression, because they are based on submission and denial of freedom, thus thwarting and even destroying the human personality; as free communities, they can be equal channels to "tune" us to the Supernatural Power, and so become equal means towards the liberation of society. Chandran wants to keep the communities alive in their roles as instruments of liberation; if they become big churches, then they fall into the category of 'institution' alongside other oppressive institutions, whether religious or political or other is irrelevant for Chandran. His passionate utterances combine his longings for a better society (meaning Sri Lankan Tamil society), his gloomy reflections on his present life in London, and his hope of finding spiritual rest in his restlessness, and peace of mind in his inner turmoil. Chandran's life seems a never-ending struggle, and his religious affiliation a never-ending quest for the Supernatural Power, that seems to be further and further from his reach; the nearer Chandran thinks its achievement is, the further the Supernatural Power withdraws. At different points Chandran seems to identify the Supernatural Power of his quest with God, with Christ, with Jesus. In Paul Tillich's known terminology, Chandran's Supernatural Power is his "ultimate concern,"¹⁸ beyond which nothing can concern Chandran, and all his other concerns in the here and now are subordinated to that Supernatural Power that is always beyond all beyond. In Bernard Lonergan's fortunate expression, we could also say that Chandran was grasped and possessed by "an other-worldly love"¹⁹; all other concerns of his, all his other 'loves' would be only penultimate;

¹⁸ Tillich, Paul, *The Courage to Be*. op.cit., p. 82.

¹⁹ Lonergan, Bernard J. F., *Methods in Theology*. op.cit., p. 242.

in his restless quest, the Supernatural Power is also the Ultimate Horizon, beyond all human achievements. Hence his disenchantment with all human religious or ideological achievements when they petrify into “systems” or “institutions.” And sadly he reflects that these Tamil Pentecostal communities one day may become also institutions. In his words:

Though I go to church, I still have questions within me. I can envision things happening in an institutional way. But I am trying to find answers through this way. I am not questioning the Supernatural Being, only the ways by which we experience the Supernatural - it can mean the church or any religion. I wonder whether the present ‘ways’ to approach the Supernatural are the ways intended by God? I do not know...

Chandran was hounded by urgent questionings when he was in the political movement, and thought that only the experience of the Supernatural Power (or Being) would give answers to his questions; but after his conversion/ realisation experience, he still feels that his questions remain unanswered by the Church:

I have found an answer, but I am not sure if I have found answers to all my questions. For example, if a person kills another, can I just sit and wait saying that I should not get involved in violence? I have lots of similar questions. I was challenged by different people to take the Supernatural seriously, and I have now done it. I have seen young boys in the militant movements dying. Are they dying for nothing? They have a cause to die for. Can I just say that they have died in vain? I do not think that I have found answers for everything. I have just started something... I need to go a long way....

These words reveal an internal struggle within Chandran about the role of the Church in his life and the life of society at large. He does not want to deny his experience of Christianity, or his realisation experience of the divine in the ongoing life of the Church; but at the same time he seems unable to justify the sacrifice and abandonment of his political commitment, because of his Church membership. He wanted to realise the power of the Supernatural in order to strengthen his political movement, but now he had to sacrifice his social and political involvement in order to be in touch with the divine. Has he left one institution to become a member of another? Has he succumbed to the paralysing power of routine and inertia? Chandran said:

But Christianity as a religion can't do anything in human life. For example, we go to church on Sundays and start the worship with a prayer. What do we pray, Jesus give me this and that, bless the church, bless the country and bring more people to the church, etc. etc. I think

this is a worldly way of looking at religion. Even if we consider the sermons, I do not know how effective the sermons are.

Has the indomitable Chandran succumbed to routine? Is he accepting his community as an institution? When I met him in 1999, he confirmed what he had anticipated in 1997:

My Church congregation has become bigger and now things have become routine, and I don't think this will help anyone.

My own observations of the communities agree with Chandran's remarks. According to reports of members and pastors, and my own observation on successive Sundays, the membership of almost all the congregations has increased in numbers.

The passionate longing for social justice is general among Tamil Pentecostals in London, not because they are Pentecostal, but because they are refugees; most of them consider themselves victims of injustice and are willing to struggle for a better world. In the case of Chandran, the failure to follow the right social practices on the part of the religious institution led him to reject the institution's religious beliefs, and his response was "I hated Hinduism." But the religious establishment of Hinduism was not the only subject of his adolescent hatred; it extended also to the Christian religious system:

In Sri Lanka there was a Roman Catholic Church in front of my house. I have been to that church several times. When the priest asks the congregation to stand, they stand; when he asks them to sit, they sit; and when he asks them to pray, they pray. If you teach other human beings to obey without asking any questions, then you are creating an oppressive system. You do not let the others think and act for themselves, but teach them to sit, or stand, or pray whenever they hear a command, which destroys the person. I hated Christianity because of that.

Chandran does not have enough theological sophistication to distinguish between liberating praxis of the Christian community and institutionalised religion; as many adolescents, he draws a general conclusion out of single incident: "all are the same"; in his disenchantment with institutionalised Christianity he turned to Marxist ideology, to find that it also is institutionalised. As an adolescent he joined the LTTE cadres in the hope of fighting for the improvement of society.

Chandran: I think religion has played a very oppressive role in society. Even Christianity has played an oppressive role. When I was an A/L student I thought that Marxist ideology could improve society, but [later I found that] it was not so. Marxism never explored or studied the feelings of human beings. If someone is happy, Marxism won't be able to understand the meaning of happiness. Likewise sorrow, love,

etc., these feelings cannot be explained by Marxism. When I started studying this ideology, these things raised a lot of questions within me. I have seen power struggle and egoism among people who have claimed that they have accepted Marxism. (...) I thought that the supreme ideology for the present world was Marxist ideology. The modern world runs by scientific ideology. But these ideologies deal with the material world. They perform material analysis. But to deal with human beings, you need to go to religions, because religions deal with entirely different aspects, even though I am not sure whether religious institutions can help us to understand the Supernatural Power. (...) That political ideology [Marxism] could be accomplished only through Divine Power. (...)

Me: I hear you mention the Supernatural Power quite often. What do you mean by that Power?

Chandran: Just energy: a Supernatural Energy. I don't think we can find an answer to this in the scientific world. We need to search for a Supernatural Energy to find answers to fill the gap. (...) Human beings cannot accept certain things, unless we have the support of the Supernatural. I understood the Supernatural as the one who could work under the control of human beings; we just need how to control it.

Me: So the quest for the Supernatural is not only intellectual and spiritual, but also practical?

Chandran: Mmmmm... I feel that without the divine relationship there won't be human relationships. Unless we have the divine relationship, humans will not be able to trust each other. This fact kindled my quest... I have not connected the Supernatural Force with religion. Religions have played different roles in society.

Some times Chandran identifies the Supernatural Power with God; other times with Christ, and also with Jesus. "A few people see God as God," says Chandran, "most of the people see God with religious trappings." But Chandran states again and again that religions, as institutions, "cannot help us to find the Supernatural Power":

Rather than being attached to an institution, I am trying to find out how to help society to deal with the Supernatural. I think there are only a few people who can see God as God. Whenever we talk about God, people immediately think about a religion. People are unable to see God without a religious form. Even if I say something about God, people will try to see me through the religion I practice. People will say that you belong to Buddhism, to Hinduism, etc. They do not understand that all religions are dealing with One Supernatural Being, and all are going to be united with the same Supernatural Being.

Religions for Chandran are not more than human institutions; as such they can facilitate or hinder our contact with the Supernatural Power:

I see religions as different institutions. Hinduism is an institution, Methodism is another institution, Catholicism is an institution, Islam is an institution, and people belong to these institutions (...) We can use the word 'conversion' only when someone changes from one institution to another.

Chandran seems to feel for the concept of "conversion" the same contempt he expresses for all religions as human institutions. But then he realises that he is in a contradiction: Is not Pentecostal Christianity another institution? And if so, why has he submitted to baptism and participation in its spiritual and social life? He answers this question in a hurry, because the time for the interview is running over:

Chandran: Christianity is not a religion. We are dealing with the Supernatural Being here, not with an institution (...). I see Christianity as a life-style; but when we say "religion," it consists of traditions, rules and regulations.

Me: How do you explain Communion and Baptism?

Chandran: The Bible tells us to do certain things; but if these things begin to control us, then we fall into traditions. The Bible talks about Communion; but if we say that on every second Sunday we should have Communion, and not on any other Sunday, then it becomes a tradition. I am attending a weekend Bible course organised by the church, so I hope that I will be able to understand things in a better way after a while.

Chandran began his quest with an attempt to control the Supernatural Power; one day he became aware that the process ought to be the other way round: instead of controlling, we should be controlled. The beginning of this new way is self-surrender to the Supernatural Power, which means self-surrender to God, which means self-surrender to Jesus. God has given us commands that we have to obey; all religions and churches are under the rule of God and have to obey his commandments; this applies also to the Christian churches. Chandran concludes one of our interviews with these words, with a profound ecumenical wisdom:

All denominational differences have arisen due to the institutional emphases of the church. (...) The Holy Spirit, baptism by immersion, etc., all these things are used by the church to prove their institutional belonging, rather than as commands from God. If the church is to fulfil God's command, then it should be able to work in harmony with all religions.

The case of restless Chandran cannot be considered as typical of Tamil converts in London. I have given to it a disproportionate amount of space because I had long interviews with him at long intervals, and every time he spoke with the same intensity.

The rest of my interviewees never mention their present attitude towards Hinduism (with the possible exceptions of Suriya, Mary and Jothi), and I did not press the issue because I had adopted a non-directive approach to the interviews.

5.3 CONCLUSION

In my observations, the comparison between the 'before' and the 'now' did not yield important results concerning drastic changes in the shape of the communities, but indicates some 'trends' in the direction they are following, with as yet no clear collective goal in sight; their future is unpredictable. We cannot predict the shape of things to come, no matter how careful our "future planning" may be, but we can perceive some trends towards the future. After talking with some pastors and church leaders, I got the impression that the communities now are at a crossroads, with some avenues open before them; they feel uncertain on which of the several open roads they should take, on what lies ahead and awaits them, what the next step should be. This uncertainty is a source of concern, discussion, and some anxiety.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

In this study of religious conversion among Tamil Sri Lankan refugees in London we tried to apply theology to human experience and, simultaneously, to bring human experience to the consideration of theology. For me, this is an exercise in ecumenical dialogue between different disciplines of knowledge. The ecumenical dialogue began with the discovery of the 'other' in his rich, full otherness, and the realisation that in this encounter both partners can enrich each other towards a deeper knowledge of truth and better understanding of reality. This mutually enriching dialogue began with the encounter of Christians from different denominational traditions; later it was extended to the encounter of Christians with world religions and ideologies; and simultaneously there has been a slow progress of dialogue between theology and other disciplines of knowledge, of the physical world as well as the human world. Theology looks at the human reality from the perspective of the divine revelation; human sciences look at the divine realities from the perspective of human discoveries; they cannot continue living each in its own ivory tower, ignoring the other. This work has been an attempt to bring them together.

I was fortunate enough to study for two years among scholars who struggle to combine the insights of both disciplines and perspectives and put them at the service of life and action in the modern world. During this time I was agonisingly aware that, while theologians and other scientists are discussing questions of method, sharpening their pencils and correcting each other's presuppositions, procedures and conclusions, there is a civil war in my country Sri Lanka, thousands of beautiful young bodies are butchered, and many other thousands of Tamils are stranded in the large cities of all the continents of the world. My research among Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in London has been an academic duty and exercise, and also an act of communion with the uprooted refugees, and with their distant roots, which are also my roots. The truth I discovered was an encounter with my own people; I could even say that the encounter was the truth, not a theoretical truth, but a practical truth, the truth of ourselves bathed in God's love in the midst of struggle and turmoil. In this encounter we discovered that together we lived in communion with the Divine. God was also in exile with his own people, a wandering God of a wandering people, my God and their God, the same One God.

In Edinburgh I had learned that theology must not remain divorced from human experience and that, for a genuine understanding of religious verities and of human experience of the

Divine, it is necessary to understand and accept both partners of the encounter; theology is not only the discovery of truth that leads us to action in the world as the practical expression of a theoretical truth ('applied theology'), as if the world were the field of application and the anvil of verification of Divine truth; divine truth is also found in action, as Hebrew thought so clearly emphasises: truth for the Hebrews is not only something to know and to say, it is also something to do. This is emphasised also in the modern "agenda for practical theology," as Alastair V. Campbell puts it in an almost programmatic way:

The new agenda for practical theology must therefore be both politically aware and theologically courageous. Religious language is not to be swept aside by simplistic translations into secular alternatives, but when religious imagery is used, it must be subjected to the acid test of a relevance, beyond a personalist salvation, to a social and political renewal. This is the inescapable atmosphere within which one must attempt a practical theology today.¹

The "acid test of relevance" for my theological studies in Edinburgh was my own Tamil culture, my own Tamil people, and the tragic situation of a prolonged civil and ethnic war in my own Sri Lanka. I was not so much concerned about the salvation of my petty self in the other world, as about the salvation of my people - Sinhalese as well as Tamils - in this world and, beyond that, the salvation of this world without a flight to "the other world." If to become a Christian I had to renounce and betray my own *kalāccāram*, I would decline the invitation, because a gospel that destroys cultures is not good news, but bad news. The well-known Sri Lankan Jesuit theologian Aloysius Pieris expresses the need of "baptism into the culture" with elegance, precision and passion:

Learn, first, the folk language. Assist at the rites and rituals of the Asian people; hear their songs; vibrate with their rhythms; keep step with their dance; taste their poems; reach them through their legends. You will find that the language they speak puts them in touch with the basic truths that every religion grapples with, but each in a different way [about] the meaning and destiny of human existence...²

¹ Campbell, Alastair V., "The Nature of Practical Theology" in Forrester, Duncan B (ed.), *Theology & Practice*. London: Epworth Press, 1990, p.17.

² Pieris, Aloysius, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Limited, 1988, p. 70.

It is sad to look at the history of Christianity in Sri Lanka and see that Christ is presented as the invincible conqueror of peoples and cultures and religions, trampling on them as the foes of truth and the domain of Satan. This was the 'crusade mentality' still alive in some varieties of Protestant Christianity in Sri Lanka. Another Sri Lankan theologian - this time a Protestant and Methodist - arrives at the same conclusion as Aloysius Pieris, and expresses it not from the perspective of the military and spiritual conquerors of Asia (the Europeans), but from the perspective of Asians themselves:

[For Asians] perceptions of Jesus are not validated by their timeless claims or by their dogmatic soundness, but by the appropriateness of the image to a specific context. ... for them, christological discourse is not only about the explanation of preconceived notions about Jesus or an exercise in the application of time-tested truths, but also about their experience of struggle and survival.³

The 'crusade mentality' implies that "for us and for our salvation" entails its correlate "against them and for their condemnation"; the Christian message in the minds of people possessed by this mentality is a message of conquest, domination and the establishment of the 'kingdom of light,' with the sequel of destruction of the 'kingdom of darkness.' The conquering Europeans considered themselves as 'the children of life' and justified the conquest, domination, colonialism and exploitation of entire continents by calling them 'the children of darkness'. The victorious conquering Christ presented by this mentality and sung in countless hymns is the destroyer of cultures and of religions, as a heavenly replica of the European victorious captains; Christ is never presented in Asia as the fecundator of cultures to make them fructify. Pieris echoes this when he argues that western Christianity has created a "Christ-against-religions theology"⁴ in Asia. He said that the theology brought from the western countries to Asia totally rejects Asian religiosity⁵ and tries to impose Christian religiosity on Western models; religious domination is the correlate of military domination. In order resist this, Pieris proposes that all the churches "must be given time to set up into the baptismal waters of Asian religion."⁶

³ Sugirtharajah, R. S (ed.), *Asian Faces of Jesus*. London: SCM Press Ltd., 1993, p. ix.

⁴ Pieris, Aloysius, *An Asian Theology of Liberation. op.cit.* p. 60.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p 61

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

This concept, emphasised by the most seminal Christian minds of Asia, is applicable to our subject of religious conversion among Tamil refugees in London. One of my first findings in my study of conversion of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees from their folk Hinduism and Hindu religiosity into Pentecostal Christianity⁷ and evangelical religiosity was that there is no open and explicit repudiation of Hinduism among the converts to Christianity (with only one exception, young Suriya), and that, after a careful analysis of their testimonies, one can discover a deep sediment of Hindu religiosity in their Pentecostal ethos. The Christian theology exported to Asia basically originated from western cultures and out of problems that churches in the west faced; that theological formulation may not be satisfactorily applicable and understandable in an Asian context, because Asian cultures are different, and different are also the problems faced by Asians. I found this very soon in my studies on religious conversion; after collecting and reading many western contributions to a theological exposition of the phenomenon and process of conversion, I soon realised that the authors rarely mention the cultural context of the converts; it seems that they take their western culture for granted. Furthermore, I recognised that the Asian context is very different, and so the Asian modalities of religious conversion naturally will display many differential marks, absent from other converts from Europe, America, and even Africa.

We talk about 'Asian context' as if it were a single cultural unit, but we must take into account that two thirds of the world population live in Asia, and there is a kaleidoscopic variety of cultures and languages in Asia; one thing is common to all Asian countries (with the exception of the Philippines): Christians constitute tiny fragments of the vast populations. From the perspective of the majority ideology Christians are "deviant minorities"; from the perspective of Asian Christians, they live in a context in which all Christian actions are intimately inter-woven and collated with people of other faiths. This is indeed inevitable in countries like India and Sri Lanka, where Christians are a comparatively tiny minority in a huge mass of people from other religious traditions. Two natural corollaries immediately arise from this; we express one in negative terms, the other in positive terms. Sugirtharajah expresses the negative: "any christological formulation should

⁷ "Toward a Theological Analysis of Pentecostalism," see Dayton, Donald W., *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism*. Metuchen, New Jersey and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1987, pp. 15-28.

not separate them [Christians] from their neighbours.”⁸ This looks simple; the positive corollary should read, paraphrasing Sugirtharajah: “any Christological formulation should bind the Christians together with their neighbours in a single bond of solidarity”; Christians cannot filter, as it were, only what they find good, ignore the rest, and collate indiscriminately. Also Christians cannot refuse all co-operation on the grounds that the optimal conditions are not present, or the people of other faiths do not fully agree with them.

After the completion of my academic work I look back with nostalgia and some melancholy at my experience in Great Britain for the last three years. I, a stranger and foreigner in Edinburgh, embarked on a journey of exploration of my own people, living in London as strangers and fugitives and refugees. Through their struggle to preserve their culture I discovered new values of our shared *kalāccāram* and, through the discovery of my *kalāccāram* struggling to survive and avoid excessive erosion and eventual extinction, I saw myself in a new light and was able to re-affirm myself by being converted to my own self and to my culture. For this I thank my interviewees and many other Tamils that I encountered in London. I chose the study of religious conversion among them as the topic of my study. Soon I discovered that the topic was deeper than anticipated, and I accepted the challenge facing me.

The term *metanoia* is often used to explain the meaning of conversion to Christianity. But it is much more than that. It means a total transformation of the mind and, correspondingly, of the human personality.⁹ Jesus called people to *metanoia* because the Kingdom of God had arrived. In my study I found that the lives of the Tamil converts were changed in London for the better, in great measure due to their incorporation and participation in the life of the Christian Tamil Pentecostal communities. They dislike and avoid the word ‘conversion’ and use instead the expression “change my religion.” On a deeper analysis we could see a paradox: It is evident that their lives have been radically changed for the better; they have indeed undergone a process of *metanoia*; and yet they reject the word ‘conversion’ as applied to themselves. On the other hand, if we analyse their “change of religion,” some

⁸ Sugirtharajah, R. S (ed.), *Asian Faces of Jesus. op.cit.* p. xi.

⁹ Lacan, Dom Marc-Francois, “Conversion and Kingdom in the Synoptic Gospels” in Conn, Walter E (ed.). *Conversion: Perspectives on Personal and Social Transformation.* NY: Alba House, 1978, p. 100.

serious questions arise: It is evident that they have changed their religious practices from temple-going to church-going; but have they really changed their 'religiosity'? In some cases that we saw above, their religiosity has remained almost intact after changing their religion, even after several years of Pentecostal belonging (Sinathurai); in others we do not have sufficient evidence to warrant a judgement in this respect. On the other hand it could also be said that their lives did not change so as to mimic the lives of the existing denominational Christian churches; their lives changed in continuity with their previous Tamil life, preserving their Tamil identity and unique *kalāccāram*.

I do not think I have idealised the process, the event and the extent of religious conversion among Sri Lankan Tamils in London; their 'cases' of religious conversion may appear wrong, or half-baked, or even syncretistic to some readers of this work. So they appeared to me at the beginning, until "I was converted to their concept and experience of conversion." From my Methodist tradition, I considered conversion as the first step in the ladder of salvation, sanctification and Christian perfection. But now I think differently. The concept of conversion-salvation-sanctification presented in Christian religion should be able to incorporate the idea of Christian – non Christian Collaboration with Panikkar that the relation of other religious traditions to Christianity "is not one of error to truth, darkness to light, evil to goodness"¹⁰, life under sin to life under grace, but rather of "potency to act, seeds to fruits, type or symbol to the thing and reality in itself."¹¹ For example, Hindu religiosity is not something utterly wrong while Christian religiosity is utterly right; Hindu religiosity can be considered as the seed that may fructify in Christian religiosity and also, we dare say, can fructify in the intensification and purification of Hindu religiosity itself.

The vigour, enthusiasm and dynamism the converts show in their religious activities should be taken into consideration before any conclusion is made about the truthfulness or genuineness of their religious change. This does not mean losing Christian religious concepts and levelling down Christianity, but it means that "the seed must die, the symbol must give

¹⁰ Panikkar, R., "Common Grounds for Christian - non-Christian Collaboration" in Taylor, Richard W (ed.), *Religion and Society: The First Twenty-five Years 1953-1978. op.cit.*, p. 34.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

way to reality".¹² Pieris wrote that theology for Asians is praxis over theory, a radical involvement with the people:¹³

Certainly not the Christian life lived within the church in the presence of non-Christians; rather, it is the God experience of God's own people living beyond the church.¹⁴

Christian life for Asians is no longer a life lived in the missionary compound or in the precincts of the sacred, it is life lived in the world. In a similar vein, Christian life for Tamils converted to Pentecostalism is not a life lived inside their church structures (they have no church buildings of their own), but a life lived in London, in their ghettos, in their families: it is there that they live, express and verify their Christian lives.

I shall be satisfied if the present study among Tamil refugees results in an invitation to others to proceed to analogous studies in the lines indicated here, and to present their new reflections and insights into folk religious practices (both Christian and other), so as to reassess the traditional Christian theologies, as theologians are tentatively feeling their way in the new theological avenues that are being explored today; and, of course, at the same time introducing and initiating a courageous new praxis to work among the vast varieties of religiosity in Asia. With the martyr Archbishop Romero we may insist that the task of building cathedrals is over; our task now is to edify the Church. It seems to me this is precisely what the Tamil Pentecostal communities are doing in London: they do not have their own buildings; they meet in homes, rented church halls in the knowledge that it is the people of believers that make up the Church, not expensive buildings.

Tamil refugee life in general shows that there is no inherent conflict between Christian and Hindu religions and religiosities. The All-Tamil Pentecostal churches have been and still are instrumental in making Tamil refugee life purposeful and meaningful in their exile in London. All empirical evidence gathered and analysed in this work points to the fact that their conversion is a transition from a state of *anomie* to a state of meaning, purpose and hope; from shattered and fragmented lives to a healthy integration of their personalities in a

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹³ Pieris, Aloysius, *An Asian Theology of Liberation. op.cit.*, p. 82.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

communal life, in continuity with their traditional mores back in their Sri Lankan Tamil villages, even though they are now living in one of the most populous metropolises of the world. From this perspective – religious conversion is real and valid when the converts say so, not when theologians pontificate about it – we can hear a cry to Christians, a clamour and an appeal to recognise the validity of the religious experience of the converts in their pre-Christian life. The past life of Tamil refugees was an experience immersed in their own Tamil culture, a healthy experience of being themselves as Tamils; now in London they look upon their present commitment to Jesus as a prolongation or enrichment of their earlier life and experiences, and in many cases as a fulfilment of a longing for God that had already been there before they turned to Christ. From the perspective of their Hindu religious practice they speak about “changing my religion”; after making the transition they never mention such a change, but the expression switches into “after I became a Christian.” There is no doubt that they have undergone a change in religion and in the intensity of their religiosity, but there has not been a wholesale change of religion if by this we mean repudiation of the old like a worn-out sleeping mat and adoption of the new.

The rituals to express their religiosity have changed. Has there been a corresponding change of the myths that inspire and support these rituals? I do not possess sufficient evidence to support a positive or negative answer; but if we equate religious myths with religious ideas, we can assert that there are very few ideas that have changed with their conversion. Their ideas in Hinduism were articulated in terms of myths and stories, and now they hold very few Christian ideas in common. The understanding of Christianity among Tamil converts in London seems very close to what Stirrat calls: “Christian teachings with local cultural practice.”¹⁵ In a thought-provoking manner refugee Tamils escaped the feeling of being left orphans of their gods by joining All-Tamil Pentecostal churches. Jesus-God provides now what their Hindu deities used to provide and seem now unable to provide. Their ways of placating God to stop punishment or of enticing him to afford blessings are remarkably similar in both instances; this also points to the conclusion that “there was no conceptual division between religion and culture,”¹⁶ and reinforces Stirrat’s conclusion to his study of

¹⁵ Stirrat, R. L., *Power and Religiosity in a Post-Colonial setting: Sinhala Catholics in Contemporary Sri Lanka*. Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1992, p.181.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.181.

post-colonial Sinhala culture and Catholic ethos. In this sense the new Tamil converts are different from traditional Christians.

All my interviewees state that, at one point or other in their lives in Sri Lanka, they had some significant contact with Christian individuals or Christian organised religion, whether in their villages or in Colombo. When emigrating to a 'Christian' country, the western Christian way of life is not totally alien to them and, because of their previous contact, the process of their absorption may encounter less resistance. It is not uncommon in Sri Lanka to find persons who attend the Christian church in one village and the Hindu *kōvil* in another.¹⁷ It is not necessarily a question of opportunism; they may claim to be truly Christians, but do not see any incompatibility with their allegiance to the teachings and practices of Hinduism. The same thing happens the other way round. There are Christians who become Hindus while retaining Christianity for marriages, as well as Hindus who become Christians while retaining Hinduism. (The same can be said of Buddhism, of course). We call this a 'dual loyalty' and attach no pejorative meaning to the expression.

The All-Tamil Pentecostal churches consist of Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka and function mainly in the following way, though there is no uniformity among the communities:

1. The congregation is composed chiefly of Tamil refugees. One can see also some 'professional' Tamils and Indian Tamils in some communities.
2. Voluntary, confessional basis of the membership. Baptism and full belonging come after a free decision of each individual; only adults can be validly baptised.
3. Self-centred religiosity, based on personal experience. Most of them have gone through religious peak experiences of one sort or other. Most of the spontaneous prayers and ejaculations begin with the pronoun "I"; only the prayers uttered by the pastor and leaders beginning with "We."
4. Fervour, emotional and positive action in worship. This is expressed in body movements, gestures and the pitch of voices in shouting. I have observed that women especially close their eyes and fists very tightly when they pray, thus adding intensity and urgency to their utterances.
5. A high degree of congregational participation, not only in worship, but also in administration and organisation of the agape meals after worship, and other activities.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.181.

6. Emphasis on strict biblical standards, such as tithing. Though in conversations one hears frequently that we must obey God's commands, I have never heard any catalogue of God's commands.
7. Emphasis on the literal interpretation of Scriptures to maintain their infallibility and inerrancy as the Word from God and sole authority to conduct their Christian lives. It seems that they rarely read entire books; they tend to read, highlight and quote individual verses.
8. Emphasis on evangelism and conversion, rather than Christian education and religious growth.
9. They install themselves at the British cultural periphery, but establish for themselves a Tamil cultural centre of the community.
10. Indifference to prevailing British culture and political organisation.

These ten traits suggest that Tamil Pentecostal communities lean towards the sect-type of Christian belonging, though some larger communities are clearly moving towards the church-type. Both modes of being Christian communities (the sect-type and the church-type) are genuine instruments of salvation. We see here the genuine salvific value of conversion to communities of the 'sect-type'; what are the mainline 'church-type' communities doing in this respect? We read in books and hear in conversations a contempt of the church-type people towards the sect-type Christians. Do mainline churches have a more salvific value because they have a more complicated theology? In view of the many competing messengers and messages that promise salvation, what is the present role of the Christian Church today?

Is religious conversion to Pentecostal Christianity a happy end to their story of long pilgrimage? Have they found in their new religious communities the answers to all their agonising questions? No, not at all. There are new questions that require imaginative and creative answers; one of them is the provisionality and insecurity of their existence in this country, in the knowledge that their lives are in the hands of unknown lawmakers; another is the rapid and visible erosion of their culture in London, especially among the second generation of Tamils. The converts themselves feel that the Churches will have to find answers to their questions as they did in the past; if the answers are not ready-made, the churches must be ready to provide answers in the future. Converts find the Church meaningful in many respects. It has helped them to find meaning and purpose in their lives. The conversion process, according to the converts, has helped them to obtain education for the family, guidance and assistance in immigration procedures, and in society at large. It has been an effective instrument to preserve their Tamil *kalāccāram* and to help individuals to

insert themselves into the larger cultural British society in a smooth and functional way. This is manifest in their frequent invitations to English-speaking preachers to address the communities and their tentative attempts to introduce some cross-cultural educational programmes. At the same time they feel that their social and cultural integration is never complete; there should always be room for freedom, change, a certain degree of non-conformity and deviance; otherwise, there would never be any social and cultural advancement and change.

However, people who are converts and at the same time try to understand the British culture feel that the Church makes many unacceptable claims and somehow, indirectly, church leaders impel Sri Lankans to live in ghettos with a ghetto mentality of fatalism and submissiveness. Vimalan strongly disagreed with his pastor over his authoritarian approach towards the membership and left the church completely. I could not trace his whereabouts and nobody has been able (or willing?) to give me a lead on how to find him. The Tooting Tamil Church membership felt that their church was unable to help them to lead a life in harmony with the British society. They complained that their pastor had created an exclusive 'cult' life in the church. The church split into two, and the protesters left the church and started another Tamil congregation. Church growth through bipartition is not uncommon among the communities of the sect-type, but still the Tamil Pentecostal communities are too fragile to undergo frequent strife and splintering of groups.

As I write this, major changes in Tamil refugee life are taking place in London. New threats to their very existence are looming. The British government introduced a proposed new asylum bill in the house of Commons on 9 February 1999¹⁸ based on the government's white paper *Fairer, Faster and firmer – A modern Approach to Immigration and Asylum*, which was published in July 1998. This bill proposes tough measures on refugee applications and is expected to be passed in April 2000.¹⁹ The Home Secretary stated on 24 August 1999:

At the moment, asylum seekers can pick and choose which area they go to and that means that a huge burden has fallen on a few local authorities in inner London and on one or two authorities within the Kent area and on

¹⁸ *Immigration and Asylum Bill: Explanatory Notes. op.cit.*, p.11

¹⁹ Home Secretary Mr Jack Straw stated this in his interview to the BBC2 on 24 August 1999 at 12 noon.

Kent county Social Services Department. So to be fair to those areas which are having to bare too much strain, we are going in for arrangements to disperse the asylum seekers. It's also, that they're going to be given one offer. That is the way of controlling the abuse of the system, because it is unacceptable at the moment. Asylum seekers who come in and claim asylum at the port of entry can get a cash benefit and social security benefits basically they just utter the word 'asylum'. Now there is obviously a major pull factor we are ending it.²⁰

There is a sense of distress, alarm and anxiety among all those Tamils who are still awaiting the official decision about their legal status in Great Britain. They consider the proposed bill as a threat to their lives. Again they feel unwanted. The gravity of the new situation is reflected in this statement by the Refugee Council:

As well as an inefficient and unfair decision-making system, asylum seekers face so many other difficulties and barriers: widespread, indiscriminate detention; poverty; poor housing; poor access to healthcare; lack of training and employment opportunities. Since February 1996, most asylum seekers have been forced to live a hand-to-mouth existence, relying on support from local councils. This system - the result of previous bad legislation - is very inefficient, wastes money and causes many problems, for the local councils and the asylum seekers themselves. It has proved to be damaging to local race relations.²¹

As humankind moves towards the end of the second millennium of Christian history, many people are undecided about what to think or believe. Human knowledge is reportedly increasing day by day at an unprecedented pace. We are under an information explosion. With the increase of knowledge (in terms of information) there seems to be also an increase in uncertainty among the masses who have lost the old religious certitudes of their ancestors. In the sixties and seventies of this last century of the second millennium many 'theologians of secularity' announced that we Christians must live in the world as if God were out of the picture, relying on the human scientific resources to understand the world and to transform it. Some even heralded the death of God and set themselves to the task of finding a secular interpretation of the gospel and to explore new ways of living as Christians in an irreversibly post-religious world. Perhaps many of those theologians were too busy in finding ways to graft the Christian message in this post-religious world to see that countless alternative

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Refugee Council, *Briefing: The New Immigration & Asylum Bill*. *op.cit.*, p.1.

religions, 'cults' and New Religious Movements were springing and mushrooming not only among the uneducated classes, but also among university students and even professors and their spouses. Millions of adolescents and young people (as well as not so many adults) joined these movements to the extent that "conversion to the cults"²² has become a major concern among parents, educators and law enforcing officers; no wonder that nowadays there are thousands of studies, from different disciplines, and especially from the field of psychology, devoted to the subject of religious conversion. Hopefully this study will add some knowledge and insight to the vast mass of studies in the subject. My study began as an academic duty and exercise and ended in a series of question marks for me: questions about the role of the churches in the cultures of the world, questions about my own Christian and Tamil identity and destiny, questions about human nature in relation to the supernatural world, the salvific value of the different varieties of understanding, appropriating and living the Christian gospel, and also of other religious traditions of the world.

²² See Wilson, Bryan and Cresswell, Jamie (eds.), *New Religious Movements: Challenge and response*. London and New York: Routledge, 1999.

LAMENT

No permanence is ours, we are a wave
That flows to fit whatever form it finds:
Through day or night, cathedral or the cave
We pass forever, carving form that binds.

Mold after mould we fill and never rest,
We find no home where joy or grief runs deep.
We move, we are the everlasting guest.
No field nor plow is ours; we do not reap.

What God would make of us remains unknown:
He plays; we are the clay to his desire.
Plastic and mute, we neither laugh nor groan;
He kneads, but never gives us to the fire.

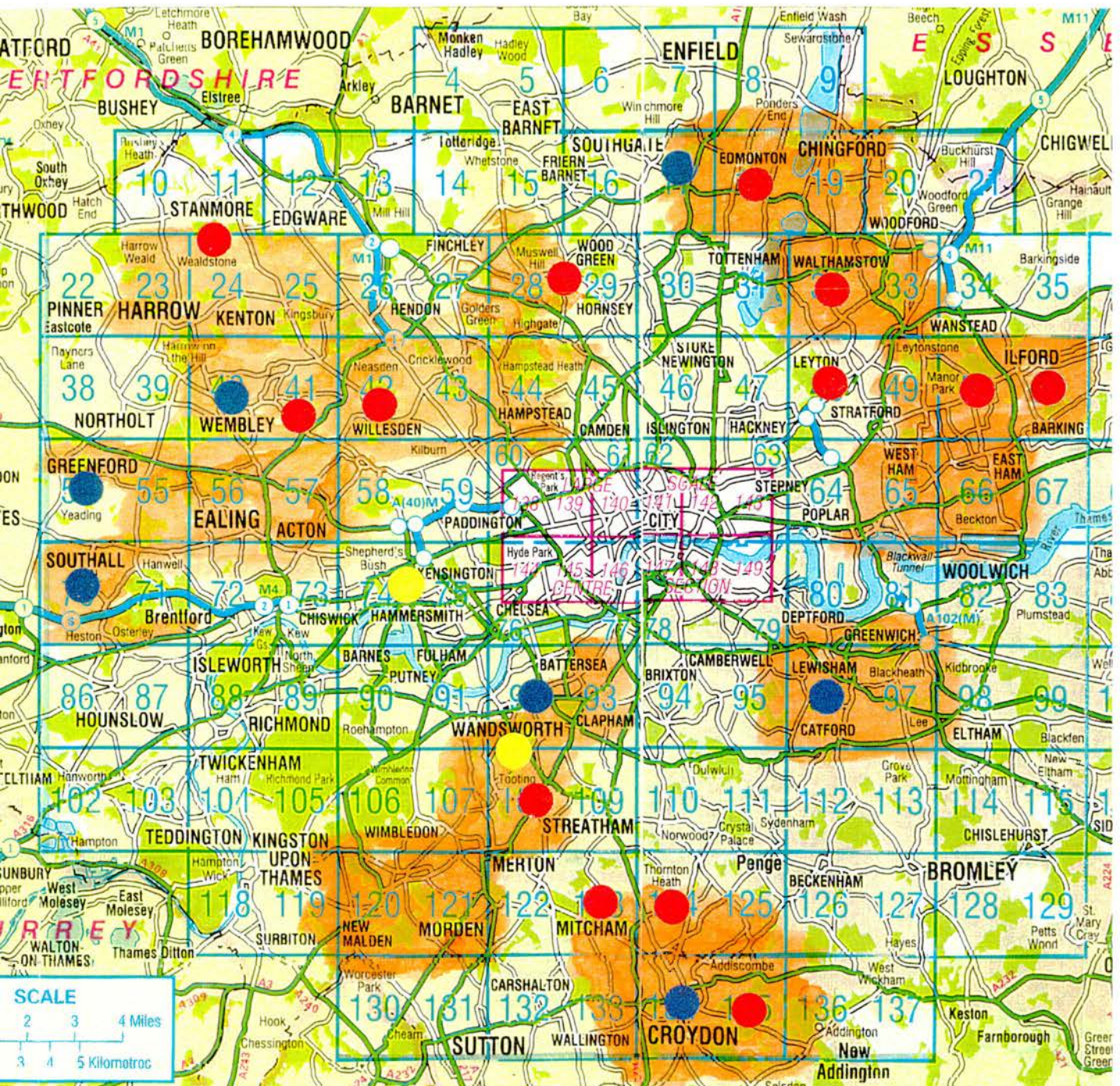
To stiffen into stone, to persevere!
We long forever for the right to stay.
But all that ever stays with us is fear,
And we shall never rest upon our way.²³

²³ This poem is taken from the novel by Hesse, Hermann, [Richard and Clara Winston (tr.)] *Magister Ludi (The Glass Bead Game)*. New York: Bantam Books. Holt, Rinehart and Winston. (4th printing), 1969, p. 397.

APPENDIX I

TAMIL SETTLEMENTS AND ALL-TAMIL PENTECOSTAL CHURCHES IN LONDON

- Sri Lankan Tamil Community ●
- Independent All-Tamil Pentecostal Congregations ●
- Church of God All-Tamil Congregations ●
- Methodist and Anglican (Sri Lankan Tamil) Congregations ●



APPENDIX II

SYNOPSIS OF PERSONAL INFORMATION ON INTERVIEWEES

Name:	SATHA
Age:	40's
Occupation in SL:	No permanent jobs,
Occupation in Lon:	Technical Officer
Dwelling:	Own House
Date of Arrival:	1986
Exodus:	Sri Lankan forces arrested young males. Came with student visa & claimed asylum
Relatives in London & Elsewhere	Wife, brother & sister are in London. Parents are in Sri Lanka.
When, Why, How became a Christian:	<p>On his own Satha went for a Tamil worship service in 1991.</p> <p>"I felt lonely in London. The church serves me as a meeting point for Sri Lankans. I first went to church in order to get some fellowship. (...) I do not have close friends among British people. I work with them, talk to them and laugh with them but it's only in the office. I don't invite them to my house. (...) When I went to church for first time I went with a worldly need. It was a simple sickness. I expected the church to meet my need. That was fulfilled and my faith in Christ grew; and for that reason I continued my link with the church and later became a Christian. That's the general pattern but some people leave the Church once their needs are fulfilled."</p>

Name:	SURIYA
Age:	20's
Occupation in SL:	Student
Occupation in Lon:	Student
Dwelling:	Rented Apartment
Date of Arrival:	1991
Exodus:	Suriya's parents were afraid that at any time he would join the LTTE. They forced him to leave the country.
Relatives in London & Elsewhere	Suriya and father live together in London. Mother and another son lives in Sri Lanka.
When, Why, How became a Christian:	<p>Accidentally he saw a Sri Lankan Tamil church on a roadside. Started attending and became a Christian in 1995</p> <p>"Student life in London confused my entire perception of life (...) I do not know whether I can explain the agony I went through as a student of a London school. I was worrying about my country and people but students here were talking about having sex with different girls. Spending hours and hours in pubs and then breaking the glass windows of shops, sleeping with girls without any commitment, and going for dances without worrying about studies made me confused.</p>

Name:	KRISHNA
Age:	30's
Occupation in SL:	School Teacher
Occupation in Lon:	Super Market Assistant
Dwelling:	Own House
Date of Arrival:	1991
Exodus:	<p>"One day my mother went out as usual. She didn't come back so after a while I went out. The soldiers had come early and lay in one of the house compounds. While I was walking I heard shh! Shh! when I turned back a soldier called me and tied my hands and threw me on the ground. I shouted, "I am a teacher! Teacher! Teacher!" "Then one officer came. I was in my sarong. He found my school identity card from my shirt pocket. After looking at it, he untied me. I can understand little Sinhala so I knew he was saying to me "don't get upset, don't be frightened, sit down." (...) Whenever the captain moved to another side, the soldier who arrested me inserted his gun barrel into my ears, rotated it into my ears and said, "today is the last day for you." This went on nearly one and a half hours."(...) That was the day I decided that I should not stay in my village any longer (...)."</p>
Relatives in London & Elsewhere	Sister and Mother are in France. Other relatives are in Sri Lanka
When, Why, How became a Christian:	<p>For three years he attended church services but in 1995 decided not to attend anymore.</p> <p>"When I came here I went to Christian churches. I have done that in SL too. Some of my friends invited me to 'Born Again' churches. I went without any problem. Later I bought a house and invited a Hindu priest to come and bless it. I organised a get together and invited my born-again Christian friends. But they refused to come saying that they could not participate in an event where there was a Hindu priest present. From that day onwards I decided not to go to Christian churches. If I can go to their church why can't they come to my temple? My friends knew that I was hurt, and that I do not go to church any longer because of them but I am very firm on that decision."</p>

Name:	GANESH
Age:	50's
Occupation in SL:	School Teacher
Occupation in Lon:	Cashier in a Food Stores
Dwelling:	Rented room
Date of Arrival:	1987
Exodus:	Married a Sri Lankan woman who had British citizenship but divorced in 1989
Relatives in London & Elsewhere	Distant relatives in London.
When, Why, How became a Christian:	<p>Through a friend in 1990</p> <p>"I got married. We were a fairy tale couple but the marriage did not workout in Britain (...) She was well established. The children were grown up. She was more married to her job than to her family. I could not support the family in any way. I had a job in Sri Lanka but that doesn't mean that I have a job here. There were many reasons for the collapse of our marriage (...) My life in Britain was at a crossroads and I wanted to talk to someone. I felt that if I stayed in Britain, one day I would just grow old and die (...) I wanted to talk to someone and went to the Citizens Advisory Bureau but that was of no help. They asked me to go back to my country (...) But I asked why? (...) I had an emotional need. Christianity served that purpose (...) I became a Christian because of my emotional need (...) I went to a friend of mine who is a Christian. He listened to my story. He made me sit with him and offered me a cup of tea. Others ignored me thinking that I was going to ask help from them; but he said that if I had no place to stay I could come and stay with him. He also said that if I did not have money he could help me. (...) I could not believe this. I asked him why he was doing this. He said that he had no big money or gold to offer, but he can offer Jesus Christ as my personal saviour and friend. This was how the message of salvation and deliverance came to me. I found a family in the Church. (...) The Church became my family and my identity. I was able to find my legs in Britain. That alone is enough to make me say that Jesus Christ is alive (...) The Church has become a family, brother and sister, mother and father, relations, belonging, love, care, and concern."</p>

Name:	SINATHURAI
Age:	40's
Occupation in SL:	Sales person
Occupation in Lon:	Sales person DIY shop. Labour work in a vegetable market
Dwelling:	Rented room
Date of Arrival:	1995
Exodus:	“(…) I went to Damam in Saudi Arabia (…) I worked in Saudi from 1984 - 1990.” He came back in January 1990 to his village. Then the war broke out and his house was completely destroyed and all the household things were looted. “I lost everything which I had earned in Saudi. (…) I lost all my six years hard earned savings just in two days of military operation.”
Relatives in London & Elsewhere	Sister's family in London. Wife, daughter and parents are in Sri Lanka
When, Why, How became a Christian:	<p>“I have no family or family relationship.... My wife is sent me letter after letter asking me to do something to bring her to the UK (…) My case was rejected, so what was the point in bringing my wife into this mess. This climate did not agree with me, I have developed a blood circulation problem (…) My hands and legs do not get enough blood supply... the doctor gave some medicine and asked me to take 3 tablets per day. So far, I have taken 800 tablets (…) I June 1996 my left hand was operated on to correct the blood circulation problem. In December 1996 the other hand was operated on for the same problem. I was worried about my health. (…) My flatmate invited me to go to this church and I went. The church services gave me inner peace. Every Sunday I went and became a strong believer in the church (…) (received baptism in July 1997) Apart from my sickness I was going through a hard time in my life. (…) Suddenly my income support was stopped. I did not know why. My asylum application was rejected. (…) I felt I should go to the social services department to talk to them about my support. I went there and related my story. Immediately they sorted out my problem, (…) This happened after I started attending the church. I think God has done a miracle for me.” (…)</p> <p>I am happy now. My prayers are fulfilled. My life has become much easier. Before that my life was a big struggle. I did not see any happiness in my life. (…) I am a happy person now. I do not have anybody to guide me here. Now I get guidance from God and I am happy that I have this strength (…).”</p>

Name:	JOTHI
Age:	20's
Occupation in SL:	Nil
Occupation in Lon:	Clerical work
Dwelling:	Council House
Date of Arrival:	1990
Exodus:	...Did not get good job opportunities in Sri Lanka and therefore he (husband) had to find a job elsewhere. "My husband wanted to come. He thought he could study and come up in life. But within one month we had realised that was not possible. Everyday we felt that we had made a mistake but we couldn't go back because we spent nearly 6,000 pounds to come to UK and it took two years for us to settle the amount. After two years we felt that we could not go back and settle in Sri Lanka."
Relatives in London & Elsewhere	Brother-in-law's family
When, Why, How became a Christian:	Through a relative in August 1997 "I would say that I realised the meaning of loneliness from the day I landed in the UK. I had been a student in India for five years. I had stayed in student hostels alone but I never felt lonely. As soon as we came to UK my husband started doing jobs for income. (...) My baby was 1 ½ months old and slept most of the time; we didn't have TV because we couldn't afford one. I didn't have friends or relatives to visit or talk to. I did not know any places, I was scared to go out alone and felt very lonely (...) I used to sit and cry. ... It was difficult for me to adjust in the new country to my first child, to a different life style and to my husband. (...) The first time I went to church was because a relation of mine invited me. ... After a few months I started enjoying the songs and felt at home in the church atmosphere. (...) I was experiencing a new awakening; a spiritual awakening in my life (...) Then we started attending church every Sunday. (...) I do not feel lonely any more. Whenever I come across a problem I just sit and read the Bible. I ask God to speak to me; and God always speaks to me through the Bible. Since I have become a Christian, I have stopped drinking alcohol. I do not find it comfortable in parties or in company of my friends. I am comfortable within the church. I see people with the same goal of getting to know Jesus more and more. (...) I am happy now. I know there is someone to help me. There is a limit to human love but God's love is unlimited (...)"

Name:	KUMAR
Age:	30's
Occupation in SL:	Fishing
Occupation in Lon:	No job - Social benefit
Dwelling:	Rented single room flat.
Date of Arrival:	1990
Exodus:	<p>He was arrested as a terrorist suspect and taken to the navy bases and tortured. Then he was kept in the Kankesanthurai army camp and later was released. The torture was so severe that his neck was affected very badly and he could not keep his head in an upright position. This forced him to leave the country.</p> <p>In 1985 went to France and lived there until 1994 and came to the UK in 1994.</p>
Relatives in London & Elsewhere	All the relatives are in Sri Lanka
When, Why, How became a Christian:	<p>Through a friend in 1994</p> <p>"It is very difficult to change one's religion in Sri Lanka. It is a big community and people would ridicule someone changed their religion. I have even seen people who have ridiculed others who have become Christians (...) Sri Lankan people in the UK live in loneliness. They have no entertainment. Starting a new life in another country is not an easy task. When people go through difficult times in their lives, if they are invited to a place where they think they can get peace of mind they just come to see what is happening. Once they realise the presence of the Holy Spirit they accept Jesus as their personal saviour (...) British people do not like us. We came to this country as refugees and they think that we grasp their job opportunities. Several Sri Lankans are holding important jobs in British companies, this is unacceptable to the white British people. They feel that we are more imperfect than them and working under us is unsatisfactory. However when I go to church the situation is completely different. The white British people even hug us and talk freely with us and treat us as equals. I think only non Christian British people have these problems."</p>

Name:	HANNA; Mary's younger sister
Age:	30's
Occupation in SL:	Pre School Teacher
Occupation in Lon:	Nil
Dwelling:	Council house with sister's family
Date of Arrival:	1995
Exodus:	After father's death in Jaffna, mother went to live with her daughter and became sick. She came to nurse her mother
Relatives in London & Elsewhere	Sister and her family are in London, two sisters and a brother are in Holland, and another sister is in Canada.
When, Why, How became a Christian:	<p>Became a Christian because of her sister's initiatives in 1996</p> <p>"There was no peace in my mind (...) No peace, happiness, culture, climate, or language available for me in this country (...) As a Hindu I spent time in temples and I wanted to do that here but that was denied to me. I told you that I was a fervent believer of <i>pillaiyār</i>, spent lot of time in the temple that was in front of our house. I wanted to observe my religion with all its ceremonies yet I could not perform even one because my sister cooked meat everyday in her house. How can it be possible to observe fasting and religious observances when they act in an anti Hindu manner at home? (...) I was busy in SL and had friends and relatives, even that was refused to me. I really missed temple worship. Still I did not know why I could not worship my God <i>pillaiyār</i> in my room (...)</p> <p>"Sometimes other Hindus ask me whether I have become a Christian because of difficulties in life. Yet that is not the case. God has a plan for me. He made use of life situations to grant salvation from everything."</p>

Name:	MARY; Hanna's elder sister
Age:	30's
Occupation in SL:	Stenographer
Occupation in Lon:	Nil
Dwelling:	Council House
Date of Arrival:	1985
Exodus:	<p>"When my aunt migrated to London (...) I felt left alone in Colombo. I wrote to my aunt and said that I too wanted to go to London. (...) In 1985 the UK government adopted an open visa policy and allowed Sri Lankans to enter the UK. I think it was God's plan that I should go to London. My faith in Christianity grew after this miracle."</p>
Relatives in London & Elsewhere	Husband, three children & a sister live in London.
When, Why, How became a Christian:	<p>Became a Christian through a friend in 1986</p> <p>"My life in London made me feel taken away from the rest of my family. (...) Suddenly I felt isolated from everyone. You can understand the meaning of loneliness only if you go through it (...) we have several relatives living in the village (...) we had several peer group friends among relatives, (...) I felt everything was suddenly taken away from me. When I imagined London it sounded good and prosperous but the actual situation was different (...) I am a Tamil girl - you may understand what I mean. (pause) I never had any boy friends in my life but when I saw the way English girls moved with boys I became frightened. I thought my life is going to be ruined by someone in London. (...) I wanted to live like a Tamil woman but did not know how to do it in a different cultural set up. Immediately I needed some people around me which I did not have in London (...) I became very friendly with my friend's friend. (...) This new friend invited me to her room for a weekend and suggested that we go for a picnic. It sounded good to me because I was desperately in need of a friend. I went to her place the following weekend. There was heavy raining during that week. We couldn't go for a picnic instead she invited me to come to her church. I went with her to a church. (...) I felt the presence of God in the services. I experienced some kind of peace and happiness throughout the service (...)."</p>

Name:	ARUL
Age:	20's
Occupation in SL:	Student
Occupation in Lon:	Student
Dwelling:	Rented room
Date of Arrival:	1990
Exodus:	Parents forced him to leave Jaffna due to the war
Relatives in London & Elsewhere	Distant relatives
When, Why, How became a Christian:	<p>He has been to churches but has not become a Christian. He feels that Hinduism has lost its impact in the Western society. (...) Christmas is a holiday here. We need a day off to have any celebration. We need to adapt our culture and religion to suit the environment. I do not know whether I am making sense. (...) This is important if you want to be a part of British society but at the same time you will have to be a part of the Sri Lankan society. Also, whatever we do, we are not going to be accepted as part of British society. So we need to belong somewhere that maintains our identity. Even in my life I went through lots of changes but at certain points I felt that I was a Sri Lankan. Maybe not a Sri Lankan. But a Tamil from the north of SL. (...)</p>

Name:	SATHIVEL
Age:	40's
Occupation in SL:	Carpenter
Occupation in Lon:	Labour job in a Supermarket
Dwelling:	Rented room
Date of Arrival:	1996
Exodus:	“(LTTE) cadres came to my place and invited me to do all sorts of jobs for them. Of course they invite me but the problem is I could not refuse their invitation. Several times I had to leave all my personal jobs to do jobs given by the LTTE (...) You are expected to do voluntary work for the sake of the country but I am not single I had to feed my wife and children. My brothers and sisters pooled money and asked me to leave the country for the sake of my family (...)”
Relatives in London & Elsewhere	Brother-in-law, and nephew and some distant relatives are in London. Wife and children are in Sri Lanka.
When, Why, How became a Christian:	<p>“I was arrested (in Norway) and taken to the police station. I was told that they were going to deport me to Sri Lanka. (...) I was asked to remove all my clothes. I was wearing a small cross on my neck chain but they asked me to remove that as well. I was not a Christian then but I had a feeling that the cross was a protective symbol and had been wearing it for a long time. (...) Just before I removed the chain I held the cross and said <i>“Jesus! If you are a living God save me from this trouble. I do not want to go back to Sri Lanka.”</i> I was kept in a prison cell without light. I started crying and prayed throughout the night. Around 3 o'clock in the morning a policeman came and opened the prison cell and told me <i>“We have decided not to deport you to Sri Lanka. We received a message from the Swedish authorities saying that they are willing to accept you.”</i> (...) The Norway police brought me and handed me to the Swedish police. The Swedish police ...said they could not make decisions for me and I would have to wait for a decision. Just imagine my situation. I thought the Swedish government would accept me but now they were saying that I would have to wait for a decision. I started praying again. I said <i>“you are the only hope for me and without you I am nothing.”</i> (...) When I reached the refugee camp, the receptionist of the camp told me that they had received instructions to admit me. Then and there I made a decision - <i>I am going to live with Jesus</i> (...) While I was in Sweden my faith grew slowly. (...) In London I wanted to attend a Christian church (...) received baptism (...) God blessed me tremendously. I am able to live in this country with hope and strength. (...)”</p>

Name:	CHANDRAN
Age:	30's
Occupation in SL:	cadre of a militant group
Occupation in Lon:	Security guard
Dwelling:	Own House
Date of Arrival:	1985
Exodus:	<p>“(…) At one point I began to feel that through armed struggle we cannot achieve a viable solution for the Tamils. I felt that more intellectual planning and a totally different approach were needed to deal with the problem. Being a LTTE cadre I couldn't do anything differently, so I quit the movement and came to London to initiate something new with the help of educated people. Even later I had many questions about the function of my political movement. I felt that I should go ahead even though I cannot find answers to everything (…)”</p>
Relatives in London & Elsewhere	Married in London; two children. Parents live in London.
When, Why, How became a Christian:	<p>Received baptism in 1996.</p> <p>I am going to church to get some peace of mind. The whole week I go through a hard life. At least if I go to church I can get some peace and satisfaction. I forget myself in that atmosphere and really feel the presence of God (…). I have realised that there is a supernatural force beyond human limitations. I had not connected the super natural force with religion. One day I viewed Christian television and saw sick people healed, invalid people got up and walked etc. (…). When my wife and the children went to a Christian programme, I went to find out how he had achieved his power. I thought that at some point he would tell the audience the source of his power (…). I saw someone speaking from the stage. He asked us to believe. I thought that it was interesting and decided to believe in what he was saying. I felt that his talk did something to me, and within a few minutes I felt some kind of inner peace. I felt the entire atmosphere changing (…). On the second day I started crying (…). I realised some kind of inner peace.</p>

Name:	SWARNAN
Age:	40's
Occupation in SL:	Office Assistant
Occupation in Lon:	Labour job in Super Market
Dwelling:	Room in a Council flat
Date of Arrival:	1994
Exodus:	<p>"We were asked to go to Mannar to receive our monthly salary. The Mannar main island was under the control of the SL army. Every time I went to Mannar the SL army said that I was a spy for the LTTE – they harassed me. Our head office in Colombo refused to send our salary to my department saying that there is no guarantee for money. They said that the LTTE would rob the money and no one will take responsibility. Yet all the employees went through hardship travelling from the LTTE controlled area to SL army controlled area. Many young people from my department had to go through the same harassment every month. I was not sure when I would be arrested as a LTTE suspect. (...) My wife's sister was in the LTTE and died in a battle. Her death was celebrated by the LTTE and SL army came to know that I am her brother-in-law. So I had to face more problems than others do. (...) I have several relatives in London. So I decided to come to London.</p>
Relatives in London & Elsewhere	<p>Distant relatives in London, wife and three daughters are in Sri Lanka, Mother, Two sisters and a brother are also in Sri Lanka</p>
When, Why, How became a Christian:	<p>"I was thinking and praying asking God why I had to suffer in a foreign land. I said, <i>"Why should I suffer like this God?"</i> I think it was around 6 o'clock in the evening, I heard the church bell. I felt like going to the church and praying alone. (...) I went inside the church. There was something going on which I did not understand. All the people were white English people. I went and kneeled down but suddenly started crying with a loud voice. While the service was going on people came and asked what had happened to me? I could not explain anything to them because I could not speak the language. Two people held my hands and took me to a room and asked me to talk. I tried to explain but they did not understand. (...) The minister of that church gave my address to another Sri Lankan lady who is a member of that church. She came to see me at the shop and told me that the pastor had asked to visit me. When she spoke to me in Tamil I started crying again. She said not to worry and that she would introduce me to a Tamil Sri Lankan pastor. (...) After a few days a pastor Sathiyaraj came to see me and spoke to me nicely. (...) I started attending the Tamil Church. (...)"</p>

Name:	RATNAM
Age:	50's
Occupation in SL:	Solicitor
Occupation in Lon:	Solicitor
Dwelling:	Own House
Date of Arrival:	1985
Exodus:	Came as a student, later claimed asylum
Relatives in London & Elsewhere	Wife and children are in London; other relatives are in SL
How, When, Why became a Christian:	<p>Through a friend in 1990</p> <p>"Though I live with my wife and children I feel lonely. I would say very lonely here. Sometime I tell my wife that I feel very lonely in this country. She says <i>"We are here, why do you feel lonely?"</i> She won't be able to understand my situation because she just stays at home (...) If you ask me whether I am happy, I would say I am not. <i>I am not happy at all.</i> In Sri Lanka my social life provided happiness but in London my Christian life provides me with happiness. I wouldn't have survived in this country for a long time without going mad if I didn't have Christ in my life. Christ gave me new approach to life. I have good friends in the church. I can visit them they can visit me. We sit and talk about the Bible, etc. (...)"</p>

Name:	SINGAM
Age:	40's
Occupation in SL:	Labour jobs
Occupation in Lon:	Labour job in a Super Market
Dwelling:	Rented room
Date of Arrival:	1990
Exodus:	The war created hardship to young boys. Initially Thayalan thought that if he went to India as a refugee he could find some employment there. It did not help him. He came to Sri Lanka collected money from friends and relatives and came to Britain to help his parents, brother and sister's families. He thought that by coming to Britain all his ambitions would be fulfilled.
Relatives in London & Elsewhere	Distant relatives in London. One brother is in France. His parents and sister are in Sri Lanka.
When, Why, How became a Christian:	<p>"The first thing I felt in this country was that I was on my own. I felt that I was left in a gloomy place without help from anyone. It was a scary and disheartening experience for me. Though I came to this country for a better future I felt that I had lost everything in my personal life (...) Some Tamils in the UK helped me to establish myself in the UK but personally I was feeling lost in my life (...) I wanted to go back to Sri Lanka (...) Even though I didn't have money I had peace in Sri Lanka that wasn't available in the UK (...) I was totally confused in my life. Sometimes when I travel in a bus, I forget where I should get off, and go elsewhere. I started crying on my own without any specific reasons. I even started thinking that I should not live, but should kill myself by jumping in front of a train or a bus. I would say that these types of ideas came into my mind very often (...) A few times I lost control of myself and went in front of vehicles to kill myself (...) Then a Christian minister from Sri Lanka came and helped me to accept Christ into my life (...) After becoming a Christian I was able to face all the problems with courage and determination (...) Whatever happens the Bible says "which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life?" I am able to face anything now with God's help and guidance."</p>

Name: SATHISH

Age: 20's

Occupation in SL: Student

Occupation in Lon: Student

Dwelling: Rented room

Date of Arrival: 1985

Exodus: Entire family left Jaffna due to the war.

Relatives in London & Elsewhere Parents and sisters live in London. Three aunts lives with their families

When, Why, How became a Christian: A friend invited him to church. He is an active member but not yet received baptism.

“As far as I know Sri Lankan life is very much associated to religion. Even though Sri Lankans have no access to Hindu temples in London, like in SL, they did not become irreligious people (...) Tamils in London have not lost religiousness but they have become more practical. (...) London religion plays another role as well. Many people including me go to temples and churches mainly for socialisation. We can meet other Sri Lankans, children can meet other Sri Lankan children so that they can learn to speak Tamil, etc. (...) At the same time people have more freedom to choose their religion in London. I've seen people change their religion here.”

Name:	ALAGAN
Age:	20's
Occupation in SL:	--
Occupation in Lon:	Student
Dwelling:	As a student lives in a rented flat but normally lives with his parents
Date of Arrival:	Was born in Yorkshire
Exodus:	--
Relatives in London & Elsewhere	Distant relatives
When, Why, How became a Christian:	<p>He understands that he is an Asian but did not feel he is part of Sri Lankan culture. Nevertheless he says his interests are closely related to Asians. He has no connection to any religion. He does not see any meaning in belonging to a religion.</p> <p>"I cannot say that I have Sri Lankan culture. I am inbetween. But I like to move with Asians. I do not know why my interests are closely connected to the interests of Asians. I don't think it is possible to sit and talk with a British person about culture, but we are enjoying this conversation aren't we?"</p>

Name:	LINGAM
Age:	20's
Occupation in SL:	Student
Occupation in Lon:	Student
Dwelling:	Presently lives in a University accommodation. In London lives with his cousin.
Date of Arrival:	1991
Exodus:	He was an only child and his parents feared that he would join the militants or be arrested as a suspect by the security forces. He left the country in order to satisfy his parents but determined to go back once he finished studying medicine at university.
Relatives in London & Elsewhere	Parents continue to live in Jaffna. Few distant relatives and cousins live in London.
When, Why, How became a Christian:	<p>He says that he is a Hindu but after coming to London he lost his religious attachment to Hinduism. He lived out of London and did not come across any Tamil Christian Churches or individuals. According to him in Sri Lanka religion played an important role but it has no effect in London. At the same time he says that people cannot change culture even though they live in a different cultural environment.</p> <p>"We used to talk about the meaning of Culture. I think culture means 'what we eat for lunch,' What I mean is, what we enjoy eating depends on our culture. I think ones food should define one's culture."</p>

Name:	SARO mother of Jeya
Age:	50's
Occupation in SL:	Housewife
Occupation in Lon:	Assist Tamil refugees in interpretation. Work with a solicitor and represents the solicitor when their client meets the immigration officers.
Dwelling:	Rented semi detached in Wembley
Date of Arrival:	1993
Exodus:	Daughter and son came to London as refugees. She followed them so that she could provide some form of assistance until they settled down properly in London. Husband was left alone in Jaffna, before he joined them he was killed in a military operation.
Relatives in London & Elsewhere	Daughter, son and few relatives.
When, Why, How became a Christian:	<p>My live in London is like the life of a wandering dog. I have no meaning or purpose being in this country. I do not know what to do. Whenever I go out, I go out for the sake of going out. I have become dependent on others, a parasite. I can't drive a car, which means that I can't go out. In Sri Lanka I was able to visit my friends and relatives, but here I stay inside the house 24 hours of the day, moving within the house without any purpose. We don't even have a garden to do things in it.</p> <p>She received immersion baptism and became a born again Christian now. She is a leader and a very active member in one of the Tamil Churches in London.</p>

Name:	JEYA; Saro's daughter
Age:	20's
Occupation in SL:	Student
Occupation in Lon:	Office worker
Dwelling:	Lives with her mother
Date of Arrival:	1992
Exodus:	Some of her friends left Sri Lanka due to the war and her mother requested her to consider her future and she also left.
Relatives in London & Elsewhere	Mother, brother and some distant relatives.
When, Why, How became a Christian:	Her mother requested that she should join the Christian church. Few Sundays after her visit to a Tamil church, she was asked to be in charge of the church youth fellowship.

Name:	KUMAR
Age:	20's
Occupation in SL:	Lay Church worker
Occupation in Lon:	Pastor attached to a Tamil church
Dwelling:	Rented room
Date of Arrival:	1991
Exodus:	Came as a student to study Theology. Completed his course and started his own Tamil church
Relatives in London & Elsewhere	No relatives in London.
When, Why, How became a Christian:	<p>He felt that he was called by God to start a Tamil church in order to help Sri Lankan Tamils who have no guidance in their life. They were like sheep without a shepherd and only through proper teaching, help and guidance they could be helped.</p> <p>He made use of his theological education, rented out a Church hall and started his own church in 1995.</p>

APPENDIX III

SRI LANKAN ASYLUM APPLICATIONS IN THE UK 1988 – 1997

Year	Applications	Granted Asylum	Exceptional leave to remain	Refusals
1988	0,402	06	0,226	0,052
1989	1,790	10	0,840	0,030
1990	3,330	15	0,455	0,005
1991	3,765	20	70,30	0,020
1992	2,085	40	4,265	0,215
1993	1,965	10	2,420	0,260
1994	2,350	10	0,105	0,955
1995	2,070	20	0,095	1,225
1996	1,260	04	0,025	2,115
1997	1,830	55	0,015	1,710
TOTAL:	20,847	191	9,176	6,587

Note:

1. The table shows applications excluding dependants because the Home office statistics give only the number of applications. Therefore number of Tamil refugees may be much higher than the figures shown above. A refugee council report ^a published in February 1997 estimated 35,000 Tamil refugees in the UK.
2. The figures under different categories (columns) do not relate to each other. Decisions of pending applications from previous years had been considered in the subsequent years. The figures show only decisions taken in each year on Sri Lankan applications.
3. Prepared from Home Office statistics 1996^b & 1997^c.

^a Protection Denied: *Sri Lankan Tamils, Home Office and the forgotten civil war*. London: The Refugee Council, February 1997, p6

^b Watson, Maleleine & Hooper, Nick. *Asylum Statistics United Kingdom 1996*. UK: A Publication of the Government Statistical Service, 22 May 1997, Issue 15/97

^c Watson, Maleleine & Dazelman, Phillip. *Asylum Statistics United Kingdom 1997*. UK: A Publication of the Government Statistical Service, 21 May 1998, Issue 14/98

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